



COUCOU

By Evelyn Pember

THE *Grand Hôtel de Provence* was comfortably filled with a most variegated and interesting assortment of visitors. There were Miss Ffrench and Miss Forster, two ancient English ladies as alike as two beetles. There was the English family — Eveline Vereker, her beautiful daughter Victory, her two smaller children, and Peter Sellinger, their tutor. There was Laura Garden, thin, pale, shy, and romantic. There was Edward Houseman, tall, distinguished, an authority on mediæval history, and the object of Laura's adoration. And finally, there was Coucou — red head and red dress, brown bare arms and legs, the vitality of an untamed tiger cub.

'Coucou' is a delightful first novel, written in a holiday mood, filled with likable characters and amusing situations, and told with a zest that rises steadily to its unexpected climax. It will make friends.

COUCOU

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BY
EVELYN PEMBER



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FOR the lives of men, like as the stars, run not upon an Helix, but on a circle; arriving to their Meridian, they decline in obscurity. But some stars there be which stand at their Zenith and Vertical Point for so short a span that no man hath named them, and when they fall under the horizon again they are straightway forgot, and none may remember what manner of stars they were.

COUCOU



CHAPTER I

EVERYBODY in the Grand Hôtel de Provence had finished dinner. The cigarette smoke hung in a blue fog below the electric lilies which sprouted from the brass plant in the centre of the ceiling.

Madame Veuve des Jardins slid her spectacles down to the end of her nose so that she might see right over the hall from her seat behind the caisse. It was good to see the hall so well filled and every one so comfortable in the excellent wicker arm-chairs.

Oreste came through the door with two more trays of coffee.

There were four cafés noirs for the English party, and two cafés cognacs for Monsieur Poulenc and his creature. Good!

Miss Coucou had taken hers to the garden. What an idea, to drink your coffee out there in the dark when you might be so comfortable! But if one is as young as that, and has one's admirers — Madame smiled at the thought of Miss Coucou.

Célestine came down the stairs. She pressed both hands ostentatiously to the sides of her

stomach. God! What they expected one to do! Three rooms to turn out between the visitors leaving by the train of seven o'clock and the visitors arriving by the train of nine o'clock. No one should compel her to carry the dust down this evening. She had made a heap by the side of each door. There would be all the passage to do to-morrow morning. Oh, those tiled floors! Up and down them, and then, directly one had finished, up and down them again. She scowled at Oreste. If he but took his fair share!

Oreste grinned at her. Célestine was not too bad. His little wife was a long way away beyond Carcassonne. It is a difficult journey to Carcassonne.

The English family were playing cards — at least the boy and the girl and the two men were playing. Mrs. Vereker was watching the game, and Victory Vereker was blowing smoke rings at the electric lilies.

Monsieur Poulenc unbuttoned another button of his waistcoat and spread his stomach a little more freely.

Madame (*sic*) Poulenc polished her shrimp-pink nails.

Monsieur Lefebvre from Rouen, lying back in his chair in the magnificence of his silken beard, read "Le Petit Rouennais."

His neat, tightly stuffed wife was absorbed in the search for a piece of meat which had lodged just under the corner of her upper plate, where she

could reach it with her tongue and yet could not dislodge it.

Their daughter, a yellow virgin, enclosed from calf to neck in a strong tartan, turned the pages of the illustrated prospectus of a railway in the Congo for the twentieth time.

Edward Houseman looked up from the game of cards to the long, uncurtained window where the blue night was as clear as ice. He looked up at the fog of smoke below the electric lilies, snuffed the hot smell of tobacco and food and human beings, and wondered why he was there instead of out under the Provençal stars.

Peter Sellinger missed his turn to take a card because he was watching the door behind the caisse which led into the garden.

Mrs. Vereker yawned suddenly and helplessly. She looked at her watch. "Laura ought to be here at any minute now," she said to the card-players, but no one took any notice of her remark.

"Buy the nine for one," said Pauline Vereker. "Two," said William Vereker. "Four," said Edward Houseman.

A motor roared suddenly in the silent street. "That's the car, children. Mind you're nice to Cousin Laura." And Mrs. Vereker rolled up her knitting and stabbed it with the needles.

Madame des Jardins left the caisse and advanced down the hall. She walked with regal dignity in her flat felt slippers.

Célestine drew back into the corner by the

stairs. She was not going to lift the boxes if she could help it — not she! Those weights were enough to murder a girl.

The glass door was flung open and Berthon came through. He carried a suit-case in each hand, his coat was greasy, and he had no collar, but all the same you could see him flaunt his panache, swagger his sword.

The boy and the girl called out to him at once, "Berthon! Qu'est-ce que vous avez fait? Soixantedix?"

"I hope to goodness not, round those corners," said Mrs. Vereker.

Berthon flourished his smile at them, shrugged his shoulders and stood back for the visitors.

Monsieur Poulenc shifted his stomach a little sideways to get a better view of the door. Madame Poulenc crossed her bois-de-rose silk legs rather higher, and arranged her orange lips in a becoming shape. She never knew who might not be coming.

Monsieur Lefebvre put down "Le Petit Rouennais." Mademoiselle Lefebvre put down the pamphlet of the railway in the Congo. Madame Lefebvre abandoned the search for the piece of meat.

Every one, in fact, prepared to find out as much as possible about the new arrivals.

First into the hall came two old ladies, as alike (at first sight) as two beetles. Small hats perched high on their grizzled hair; they had long noses,

long coats, long skirts, long shoes, and long umbrellas. Each was bent sideways under the weight of a dressing-case which was clothed in navy blue canvas.

Célestine knew that kind. They'd as soon be parted from their souls as from those old cases of theirs. And the keys! Ah, God! the hiding-places they found for them! Their little games made her laugh enough to die!

Monsieur Poulenc raised his eyebrows at his lady.

And then, close behind them, came a thick, dark young woman, picturesque and over-coloured, and behind her a thin, pale young woman with a very dirty face and a hat pushed crookedly on untidy pale hair.

"Laura!" Mrs. Vereker had her by the hands and had kissed her dirty face. The whole English party were round her in a moment. The pale girl seemed to be dazzled by the glare from the electric lilies. She blinked at them.

The whole of the centre of the hall was filled with confusion and chatter — Berthon, Oreste, Célestine (Célestine had been forced to come forward), the boxes, the new visitors, the English party. Only Madame des Jardins seemed to emerge with her head above it. And then, into the crowd and muddle, as Columbine in the Harlequinade spins on to the stage and scatters to the background Old Joey with his sausages, and the policemen and the boys and the lady

with the perambulator, a girl in a red dress flung through the door behind the caisse and across the hall.

She put her arm round Madame's shoulder, she laughed, she whispered something to her, she winked at her, and she was gone out of the door on to the street.

And Harlequin?

The door behind the caisse swung open again, and he — no, three of him, came through the hall and made their exit in the girl's wake. Harlequins? Well, there were no others; but they danced sadly slow for the tune that Columbine had set.

The bedroom passage was bordered by its nightly avenue of shoes. In front of some doors two pairs stood together, in front of others one pair stood alone. Madame sighed a small sigh of pity as she walked between them to her bed.

She felt sorry for the solitary pairs and sorry for the companioned ones. Either way it was so tiring!

Célestine felt contempt for certain of the shoes — for Mademoiselle Lefebvre's, for instance, which looked so naïve with their little snubbed noses and the brass eyelets twinkling out of the black leather, as they waited, very neatly together, outside the door of No. 14.

For others her feeling of contempt amounted to hatred.

Even on this, their first night there, she felt so strongly about the two pairs of long flat black-kid shoes outside No. 26 that she gave them a little kick in passing.

There were seldom any shoes outside No. 24.

Mademoiselle Coucou cleaned her own white canvas ones and set them on her window-ledge to dry. But to-night there was a pair of strong brown sandals. Célestine picked them up and turned them in her hand. They were clumsy things, and twice as big as her own slippers, but she sighed over them enviously. If she had the chances that some people had!

Outside No. 21 a pair of large magenta boots brutally dominated a little pair of soiled coffee-coloured slippers, wilting on their spiky heels.

But shoes, after all, do not always suggest the truth. Inside No. 21 Monsieur Poulenc sat upon the edge of one of the twin beds. His pendulous stomach hung in a fold over the trousers of his pyjamas. The coat was still waiting on his pillow. He had paused before assuming it to blow his nose. A pair of tears, oozing from his nearly submerged eyes, were pressed up over the roll of fat beneath them, and slipped down swiftly on to either cheek. He had just rediscovered the fact that there is nothing in life, absolutely nothing — not affection (but one would scarcely expect affection); not even gratitude, common gratitude. "Herminie, tu es une sale petite biche," he whimpered over his handkerchief.

But Herminie was far too busy to be interrupted by his snivellings. She was working hard before the looking-glass with a small pad of cotton wool and a bottle of spirit to remove the cosmetic from her eyelashes. Bon Dieu! What a time it took! And she went through it every day — here in this God-forsaken place — for whom, for what, she would like to know!

In No. 25 Laura Garden sat upon her bed in a white linen chemise and looked despairingly at the tissue paper which covered all the furniture in the room and most of the floor. How she did hate unpacking! She had washed her face and brushed her hair and taken off most of her clothes and yet she knew that she was hours away from getting into her bed.

She sighed and yawned. The smell of stocks came in at her window from the garden. Stocks in April! And yet she felt tired when she looked out in front of her over her holiday. Evie — dear Evie — and Victory, and Peter, and Peter's friend. Oh, what a lot of talk they would entail! She felt too old for it, or too tired, or too stupid — all the same thing, perhaps.

And meantime — why, oh why, did she always pack with so much tissue paper? And her clothes would look as if she had slept in them just the same.

In No. 26 Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench had finished their unpacking. Miss Ffrench, as usual, had organised the room. Almost all the visible

objects were enclosed in decent cases of holland marked with their initials in red or blue cross-stitch.

To-morrow Miss Ffrench meant to obtain a screen, if there was such a thing in the hotel. For to-night they would manage.

Miss Ffrench was still putting the final touches to her organisation, but Miss Forster, her thought greedily fixed on the bed which had been allotted to her, was managing already. She had put on her night-gown over her stays and petticoat, and was removing the rest of her underclothes beneath its shelter.

Strange bulges ran down the flannel tube like rabbits down a snake. And then, oh dear, oh dear! the tape of her knickers became hopelessly knotted. She pulled the flannel tube up over her face, but it was so dark inside it. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! She'd never be able to see to disentangle that knot!

In No. 23 Peter Sellinger was sitting close against the window composing a poem on the delight of loneliness and his own peculiar need for it. He was writing by the light of the moon, which was still rather young for the purpose. He was not getting on with it very well, but it was no use going to bed until that girl and those young fools had come in. If he did get to sleep she would wake him slamming the door of the next-door room — though, as a matter of fact, he had never been able to get to sleep when he had gone to bed

early, because he had always been waiting for the slam to come.

What the devil the girl could be at, stravaging about outside as late as that! He thought he heard a step on the gravel, and got up quickly to press his nose against the wire shutter.

No, nobody. Curse it, how he had smudged his writing!

No. 24 was still empty when the moon (an ugly lop-sided luminary, still wanting a quarter of its circle) was at the top of the sky.

CHAPTER II

THE square of the window was grey when Laura woke, and a blackbird was trying his notes, cautiously, one by one.

Very soon she could see the things in her room — the outline of the basin, the hump of the folded clothes on the wooden chair, and, oh dear! a piece of tissue paper beneath it that had escaped her the night before.

And then, all of a sudden, the sun swam up, and the sky was piercing blue, and she could see the rock points of the mountains like white spires above the cypress hedge at the end of the garden.

The blackbird, sure of himself now, was pouring out his song with all his strength, and a thrush was singing against him, drier and shriller, and a hundred sparrows were chattering and squeaking.

A door banged, and a pail was set down with a cloop in the yard.

One of her taps gurgled and coughed. Some one was running water in another room. Up already. Not Claire — Claire would have thumped on the wall. No, Claire was across the passage. . . .

She looked at her watch. Half-past seven. Get up. . . . She turned lazily on to her back.

A man's step on the path outside. A man's voice calling gently "Coucou!"

More steps. More voices — two, three of them. “Coucous!”

And then, in imitation of the bird, a shower of cuckoos, “Cuckoo, cuckoo . . .”

She rolled out of bed and went over to the window. “Mm. les voyageurs sont priés de ne pas relever les stores à cause des moustiques,” she read the label above the window again. She had obeyed, and kept the wire shutter closed. They couldn’t see her through it, but she pulled on her dressing-gown before she looked out.

There on the path, just beyond the slope of the kitchen roof, were the three young men of the night before, hatless, coatless, tieless. The fresh new sun washed over them, and made them part of the divine young morning, the divine garden. The parade of wallflowers flashed up at her; the black spires of the cypress hedge were as still as the white spires of the mountains.

The shutter of the next-door window went up with a slam. “Idiots!” The girl spoke softly. “Do you want to wake the whole hotel? I’m coming now,” and the shutter came down with a slam again.

The young man with the long nose struck an attitude with his arms outstretched to the window.

A moment later she heard a door open and shut, and some one running down the tiled passage. The three were strolling along the path. The

long-nosed one was lighting a cigarette, and delicious little puffs of tobacco smoke came up to her mixed with the scent of wallflowers.

Ah! there she was. The same girl as the girl of the night before, of course — the same, but much lovelier in the morning loveliness. She was dressed in a red cotton dress, and her hair was almost red in the sun. Her brown legs and arms were bare, her bare feet were in white rope-soled shoes.

Laura pressed her nose against the wire shutter. "Got everything, Moses?"

The fair young man swung a brown canvas sack at her. "Everything here." And off they went down the path between the pansies and wallflowers, and round through the gap in the cypress hedge.

Laura watched them out of sight, and then she sat down on her chair at the edge of her heap of clothes. She felt tired, as if she had been up for a long time.

Her hair was limp. Her face looked grey in the dark, blotchy mirror. She was quite old, she told herself. Well, why shouldn't she be? Why did she mind? What did she want from youth?

Claire's voice at the door — "Precious!" How she wished that Claire wouldn't call her "precious" in the passage! Claire didn't feel old. Claire came in with a flounce. She had on the orange sweater and the blue skirt that Laura loathed. Some one had told her that she looked

like a gypsy in them, and she had been a gypsy, mostly, ever since.

"Preshy . . ." She engulfed Laura in her orange arms, and nestled her face on Laura's bare shoulder. Laura suppressed a wriggle with iron control. What a mercy that she hadn't got to manage her face too! She watched her tired eyes in the glass.

"I do want my breakfast, Clairey!"

"Shall have it, too!" Claire was in a good mood.

"Coffee, Lamblein?"

"Yes, coffee. . . . I'll be down by the time it comes. And get them to give it to us in the garden. We don't want to run into all the mob. . . . Claire ——" (she was fastening the strap of her brogue shoes).

"Yes?" Claire was at the door.

"We ought to get rope-soled shoes — every one wears them here. . . ." But when Claire had shut the door she shook herself. Every one! What nonsense!

The coffee hadn't come when she came into the garden.

Claire was sprawling, as much as she could sprawl, on an exiguous iron chair before a small iron table. She was smoking a cigarette and smiling round at the garden in a possessive, embracing kind of way.

"Pretty good, isn't it, Laure? Coffee's just coming. The waiter is called Oreste. Isn't that

a joy? Seems as if the Roman names have lived on down here. He's a beautiful black peasant from the Camargue."

Claire shook back her own black hair, and Laura felt that by the morrow Claire would probably (if only in her remote ancestry) hail from the Camargue herself. Claire had a habit of deriving from all the peasantry of Europe in turn.

The glass door of the *salle-à-manger* banged, and Oreste (rather undersized and greasy, Laura found him) came across to the dusty table, set square with a tray poised shoulder high on the prongs of his fingers. What a big jug of coffee! What a big bowl to drink from! Laura felt happier.

Oreste waved a dirty napkin, beamed, bowed, tucked it under his arm, and left them.

Laura broke a piece from the yard of narrow bread. She was happy. She was going to begin her holiday now.

"Good coffee." She smiled at Claire. After all, Claire had had all the trouble, all the arrangements, all the fuss of the journey. She wouldn't have come away unless Claire had dragged her. There was that in Claire, however much you might dislike in her — a sort of chivalry, of protectiveness, and the energy that does things, and makes other people do them. She would never have come by herself. It wouldn't have seemed worth while. She would just have stayed at the flat reading, muddling about in her mind, until it was time to begin work again.

Claire stretched out her leg under the table and pressed her foot on Laura's. The coffee was her doing, of course — and so much more than just coffee.

There was a yell, a number of yells, from both ends of the garden at once, as two bicycles, each bearing a passenger on the back as well as the rider, rushed down upon each other on the narrow path, wobbled, collided, and collapsed in a chaos of legs and arms and wheels.

It was some moments before the chaos resolved itself into William and Pauline Vereker, and Peter, the tall tutor, and an extremely dirty youth in an extremely dirty white apron. The children rose gallantly to the occasion. They advanced to the table. "We're frightfully sorry, Cousin Laura, to have come crashing into the middle of your breakfast like this."

"It was Billy bet Marcel that he and Peter could beat me and him."

"Frightfully sorry, Miss Garden. It was all my fault."

Peter was pinker than ever as he banged the dust out of the knees of his grey flannel trousers.

"You had better cut off, Marcel." To order Marcel helped him to reëstablish himself.

They heard a shutter opened above them. Eveline leant out.

"Billy, Bun, if you've broken your bicycles you must pay for them out of your own money. Morning, Laura. Morning, Miss — er ——— Lovely

morning. Yes, delightful. . . . So *French*, I always think. . . . Children, have you cut yourselves anywhere?"

Bun looked ashamedly at her knee, where the blood was trickling from the tear in her stocking. "Nothing much, Ma."

"Come in at once and be iodined. Are you cut, Peter? Is Billy cut? Is Marcel cut?"

They were all bleeding somewhere. Even Peter couldn't get out of it. They all had to go in, and he had to carry off his going as best he could. Laura was amused to watch him. And Marcel? He mustn't go in through the *salle-à-manger*? Well, then, he must come in the back way. Even he, with all his volubility, couldn't escape the ministering Eveline.

Laura thought of her up there in her room — iodine, lint, scissors — so kind, so efficient. . . . That was a good kind of life, she supposed, looking after people — your children — being depended on by them. Yes, if you could feel it all to be worth while — important. But if it slipped away from you into unreality, as it would with her? Children, perhaps, if they were your own, would go on mattering. . . . Even their scratches? They ought to, she supposed. But that great hulking youth? And the filthy Marcel? They'd all matter to Eveline. . . .

And yet how lonely she would be if she were Eveline! Her children weren't her friends. Perhaps nobody was her friend — at least not in the way Laura would need them to be.

Eveline was just the opposite to Claire. Claire had to establish a personal relationship with everybody and everything. She couldn't look at a pat of butter without making it her pat. No, it wasn't that she wanted. She hated it. She liked to slip by things — to let things slip by her without touching her. . . . If she had ever really known what she wanted, perhaps she would have got it. If you didn't know, you caught at this and that, thinking, as it flashed at you, that it must be what you were looking for, and then, soberly face to face with it, knowing it for something so remote from your seeking. . . .

People like Eveline knew what they wanted. People like Claire knew what they wanted. She gave a little wriggle at the thought of what Claire wanted. She had to shut her eyes to it while she was with Claire. . . . After all, there were so many other things about Claire — her good brain, her protectiveness. . . .

"Claire, what are we going to do this morning? Let's go out somewhere. The Roman things? Shall we get them done?"

"I don't think they're like that. I've an idea they're pretty fine. Look, Laura, there's that girl — your cousin — and the dark man."

Victory was coming along the path with Mr. Houseman. He was talking to her in so low a voice that they could not hear what he said. They came up to the table.

"Good morning, Cousin Laura. Good morn-

ing ——” and Victory looked at Claire. Mr. Houseman bowed slightly and without smiling.

“Have you had your breakfast, Victory?”

The girl looked down at Laura. How strange she was, with her white face and great empty velvet eyes! Laura thought her beautiful.

“Not yet. I’m always late.”

“You’ll have to wait a horrid time, won’t you? Ours took hours.”

“No, Edward has ordered it for me. He always does.”

Claire was assaulting Edward. She was leaning over the table to him. “A nice hour to come down! You’ve missed the most precious time of the morning,” and she shone her eyes at him, and jerked back her hair. The man looked at her without a smile.

“I had mine at seven.”

Laura blushed. She must cover Claire from Victory. “We — we thought of going ——” she blundered in, but at that moment the glass door banged behind Oreste, and he flourished the tray he carried on to a table at the other end of the square, against the house wall.

Victory smiled vaguely and moved away to it.

Mr. Houseman made his unsmiling, wooden bow again, and followed her.

“I must talk to him” — Claire was undaunted. “Did you see the book he had under his arm? Gide’s ‘Faux Monnayeurs.’ I want to know what

he thinks of it. He evidently reads. He looks like a person of some intelligence ——”

“Not now, Clairey,” Laura was beseeching. She really couldn’t bear it if Claire forced herself upon them now. The man was so obviously absorbed in Victory. He was leaning forward, talking to her, looking at her, as she sat, bored, lovely, empty-eyed, looking at nothing and eating her bread.

“Come, Claire” — she was going to be really firm — “let’s get out now. Come and fetch your hat. Don’t let us waste another minute.”

But as they pushed back their chairs, Eveline’s shutter was opened, and Eveline leant over her sill.

“Are you going out, Laura? I meant to get down to see you before you moved, but I’ve had such an awful lot to do. I had my breakfast early, but I never can get done — the children’s stockings, and the thermos to wash. Where are you going? The monuments? I may find you there; we’re all going to start out in a few minutes. Victory, you’ll come?” But Eveline’s voice was doubtful here.

“No, Mother.” Victory didn’t even glance up at the window above her.

“What will you do, dear? *Much* better come — a lovely morning — you don’t want to waste it all. . . . What do you *want* to do?”

“Nothing. Read, perhaps. Most likely nothing.”

There was a pause. Laura could hear Eveline holding her tongue.

At last she ventured again, "Edward, are you coming, or are you staying with her?"

He jumped up. "I'll start out with you, Mrs. Vereker, if you'll let me, and I may go on and exercise myself a bit."

He turned and looked down at the girl again, and Eveline looked down at her, too, out of her window, leaned a little further over her sill, as if she would try again with her; but she thought better of it, drew herself back into her room and closed down the shutter.

Victory had looked at neither of them. She took a cigarette, lit it, slowly inhaled the smoke, pulled the yellow novel towards her but did not open it, sat there, isolated, separated from them all.

"How beautiful she is!" whispered Laura, letting her thought escape into words.

"Beautiful?" Claire was furious. "Horrible little minx! Empty face, eyes like fishes'. Bored to death because she's so damnably stupid, I should say ——"

Laura held her tongue, but she went on in her thoughts. "She's beautiful," she said to herself, "mysterious. . . . Eveline can't begin to understand her. But that man's in love with her. And she doesn't care for anything. . . . That's her charm, perhaps. . . ."

Madame, solicitous for the amenities of her

hotel, had assured them that it was the shortest possible walk to the "Antiquités," but Laura found the uphill road a mile or more.

Claire strode along by her side, taking to herself the olive trees on either hand, the yards of newly sprouting vines, and the prodigal roses which poured their beauty in a torrent of bloom down the faces of the sparse cottages, or swearing passionately at the overwhelming dust-cloud of a passing motor-bicycle.

The sun was hot on their backs. The young plane trees on either side of the road shut in their view so that it was only for the last few yards before they came out upon the little plateau that they had a hint of the mountains.

The surprise of their beauty gave Laura a little shock of delight — the sharp spires, the fierce white crags of the rocks, the black-dark pines struggling up from their base.

"Cezanne's country," Claire was saying. "I can only see it as Cezanne painted it."

But Laura couldn't "see" the mountains as anything yet; they were so new to her, so surprising, that she could only stand still and let them fill her eyes.

"And here, good Heavens, are the monuments! Look, my child," and she turned Laura round by her shoulders.

Yes, there they were: the arch, and the round sort of tower affair. What was it called? The Mausoleum?

•

She gazed at them faithfully, waiting to feel something about them.

Claire was full of enthusiasm. "Stand here, Laura — here where you can see the plain through the arch. . . . Look how fine it is ——"

Laura looked. The blue plain stretched away infinitely.

Was that the Mediterranean at the join of the sky? Or was it the other way? Avignon? But the arch was the thing. Well, there it was. It certainly looked *Roman* enough. She'd forgotten who built it. Some victorious general or other. Did he march through it at the head of his soldiers? But how silly he must have looked — making a half-circle from the road to go under it, and then round again to the pass through the mountains! Could he have achieved it with any sort of dignity? She tried to force her imagination to a romantic picture — the shine of the helmets put out by its shade, the spears dipping under its stone. . . . She screwed up her eyes, cocked her head on one side, and tried with all her might to see — and saw, almost with a gasp of relief, two meagre black figures — the two old ladies, the two old earwigs, Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench, appear under the arch. One held an open guide-book, the other limped badly, her weight on her parasol. Their faces were grey from the heat, but their black jackets were neatly buttoned, their necks encircled by lean feather boas.

The leader with the guide-book was so cross that her voice was shrill. "Go and sit down, dear, if you like — do by all means. But the next time you travel I wish you would have your corn ——" And then she spied them. "First century. Ah, that *is* late!"

"Yes, very late, dear." The lame one was patient.

"Yes, very late . . ." And they both looked firmly at the naked Gaul above their heads.

"Let me see, now, the north side . . . Is this the north, dear?"

"Where is the sun, dear?"

"Oh, God!" said Claire. "They give me the hoodle-doodles; but I can't, in common humanity, see the one with the awful corn do the tour the wrong way and have to walk all round again in her agony." And she went across to them.

The old lady with the guide-book was a little dignified, but the lame one was palpably relieved that Claire should take charge of them.

Claire was admirable. "This is the west," she began. "Those two figures ——" Claire always remembered everything she had read or been told.

Laura wandered off to the other side of the plateau, and sat down on a lump of rock. She gazed conscientiously at the monuments. She would have liked to sit the other way, facing the mountains, but she felt that she ought to stay, in her mind, with Claire. She wasn't very successful

at staying, because her eyes would slip through the solid buildings and settle on the transparent distance of the plain.

The thin sweetness of the thyme crept up from beneath her feet; wisps of cool air played round her. She did not hear the footsteps until they were close behind her. She looked round sharply. Peter and Mr. Houseman were by her side. "Oh!" she said foolishly, bewildered by her sudden recall.

"Do you like them?" Mr. Houseman looked down at her with his odd gravity.

"Marvellously good, don't you think?" Peter encouraged her.

"I — I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure ——"

"I expect your mind is too full of reminiscences — the accumulated junk of years — for you to be able to see them at all as they are." Mr. Houseman seemed almost sorry for her.

"I expect that's it. They really look to me like objects from a museum put out here to be cleaned or something ——"

"And all you associate with the objects is the fustiness of the museum and the smell of the hot-water pipes."

Laura smiled. "And how my legs ached, and how I *tried* ——"

"Peter" — Mr. Houseman's eyes smiled as he looked at the young man — "has got the digestion of a whale. He can swallow the whole British Museum at a gulp without feeling satiated."

"I had a pretty inspiring guide in him, Miss Garden."

"Laura, where are you?" It was Claire's voice calling, Claire coming round the arch. She had shed Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench.

"I must be getting on." Mr. Houseman looked at Laura and then at Peter with his grave eyes, and walked quickly away past Claire and down to the road.

Claire looked angry. "What did you do to the wretched man, Laura? What did she do to him" — and she turned to Peter — "to send him flying off like that?"

Peter mumbled something, and then, because (it seemed to Laura) he could n't think what else to say, asked if he might walk back with them.

Claire cheered a little at this.

"I've lost the children," Peter exclaimed. "Their bicycles are racers, and neither has even the pretence of a brake, so God knows where they are by this time."

"You're fond of children?" Laura asked him.

"I'm fond of these. They are really marvelous, you know. Completely unsophisticated. And Billy's rather beautiful — his mind, of course I mean — so extraordinarily simple."

Claire nodded. "That's what you get with children and peasants."

Laura felt nervous at the peasants, but happily Claire's thoughts veered again to pursuit of Mr. Houseman.

"And your friend, tell me about him."

"Edward? Oh, he's great! Mrs. Vereker admires him tremendously. This is the third time he's been out with us like this."

"What does he do?"

"He was a Don at Oxford, you know — Mediæval History; about the most efficient man they've ever had at his job. He's chucked it now, and got something at the Museum."

"Why did he leave Oxford if he was such a success?"

Claire voiced the question, but Laura asked it, too, in her mind.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do know the reason, because he told me, but I don't think it was for publication — I mean I don't think it was the sort of reason he would want talked about."

Was it to be near Victory? Laura wondered.

"He's got a first-rate intellect." Peter was warming up. "He could get pretty well what he wants, but he doesn't care a curse for success."

"Isn't he" — Claire was politely tentative — "rather *bored* with Mrs. Vereker? I know Laura always says she is such a good sort, but she hasn't the brain of a rabbit, has she? It seems such a horrid pity when women like her let go of everything and relapse into unleavened domesticity. After all, an animal as a mother ——"

"Oh, but Edward adores her — we all do. I love her dearly. She's the most marvellous person to be with."

Claire didn't like this. "Tell me about yourself," she said.

Peter blushed.

"There's nothing to tell. I'm still up. I've got another year — reading Greats; but I'm only moderately good. I should never make an absolutely first-class scholar. I haven't ——"

He was interrupted by a peal of bicycle bells, and the children shot by them in a cloud of dust, turning the corner at the bottom of the road by what could only be a miracle.

"I must pursue them. Hope to Heaven they've hit nothing hard — Mrs. Vereker does hate their smashes." And he was off after them at a run.

She and Claire were alone in the garden for luncheon. Eveline had friends with her who had motored from Avignon to see her.

She left them for a moment after the meal and came out into the garden to Laura. "My dear, I feel so unsociable. I'd hoped to have got you for a picnic this afternoon, but, you see, I couldn't refuse the Struthers: they're only in Avignon for three days, and I am devoted to Mimi. But will you and Miss — will you both dine at our table this evening? *Do*, Laura! I do wish you would every evening if it wouldn't bore you. *Such* a help with these two young men! Edward Houseman's a great dear, but so clever! I feel a perfect fool with him. And I am sure he must get sick of the children ragging. And Peter's very clever too.

And Victory is so naughty, you know. Just a stage, I think, don't you, that so many girls go through nowadays? And she won't make the smallest effort to talk. . . . So nice that you will! It's so nice of you, Laura — such fun to have you! Seven o'clock, then? Or shall we say quarter past? Quarter past wouldn't matter, I think. I'm always so afraid of seeming English in our ways — I mean when one's abroad I do think one ought to do as they do."

Dinner, to Claire's disgust, was submerged in childish jokes. Edward and Peter ragged unceasingly with Billy and Bun, and though Eveline tried to check them, Claire was unable to make the smallest impression on the conversation. She tried again and again to slip between the nonsense some phrase which would compel attention, but it received no more than a perfunctory acknowledgment, except from Eveline, who would lean forward across the table and try her hardest to make a space for it. But Eveline was powerless against the flood of silliness. Victory alone was neither swept into it nor disturbed by it. She drank her wine, ate her dinner, and stared at the other people in the room, bored and aloof.

Before the end of the meal Bun's giggles had developed into hiccoughs, and when they filed out into the hall she was sent up to her bedroom to recover.

They sat themselves in the wicker chairs round

the table in the hall. Here at last Claire had her chance, and took her place between Peter and Edward, while Billy hovered harmlessly in the background.

Eveline drank her coffee quickly and went upstairs to Bun. Edward rose too, and followed her, with a muttered excuse of writing to do.

Claire pinned Peter with her eyes. "Tell me," she said, "what is one to do if one is born with the temperament and desires of a gypsy, and yet is unfortunate enough to belong ——"

Laura stopped listening. The rim of the moon showed below the top of the tall window. She got up from her chair, which was half hidden by the coat-stand. Victory was fingering her novel. Peter's eyes looked desperate, but he was unable to remove them from the eyes of his captor. She sneaked across the dusty tiles of the hall, up the stairs, took her old cloak from her room, down the stairs again, across the hall to the little back door behind the caisse.

She took the road up to the mountains.

The moon cast the shadows of the plane trees on either side in an interlacing pattern across its white surface. The night was quite still. When she passed a garden, she walked into a cloud of scent from the roses and the honeysuckle. Happiness crept into her. The chatter of the hotel seemed a world away from this magic night. The silence freed her. The road had no length in it. It seemed to her that in a minute she was at its

top, and the mountains stretched along before her. She stood balanced on the edge of her desire to follow the pass into the mountains, perhaps to climb among them. She even took a few steps across the plateau towards them. But the adventure seemed too tremendous for her, more than she might allow herself, and with a sigh of relinquishment she sat down upon her block of stone.

Presently she swivelled round on it to face the monuments. The arch and the tower were, as she had hoped, new to her in the moonlight. The dark lines of the tower were fretted clearly on the sky. Her eyes moved up its height.

Was that a figure under its topmost canopy? She got up from her stone and moved nearer.

A man stepped out of the black shadow on the arch. She started. "Oh," she said, "it's you!" as Edward Houseman came over the moonlit grass to her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't see you at all until you came near. Your clothes are the colour of the burnt grass — filemot. A good word for a good colour, don't you think?"

Oh, dear! Was he the sort of man who would think her the sort of woman to be pleased by talk of her clothes or appearance? She waited to see if he would go on. Thank goodness he did not.

"Do you like it better to-night?" He nodded at the tower.

"Yes, I think so. But everything looks more than itself to-night. Is that a figure up there?"

"Two figures."

Ah, yes. She could see them now. Two. Leaning together, their heads slightly turned to look out over the plain.

"Cæsar and his wife? Some sort of Cæsar, whatever Cæsar it was?"

He laughed a little. "Not his wife."

"Why? Had he a bad kind of wife, like the woman who was such a trial to Socrates? Do you mean it's his — his" — she couldn't find the word — "his lover?"

He laughed again. His laugh was gentle. "No, it is Julius Cæsar and Marius, two soldiers looking over their conquered land. Only ——"

"Cæsar and Marius? I like that far better."

"Far better? Do you mean than that they should be husband and wife, or man and lover, as you call it? Why do you like it better?"

"It seems something more real to make a monument of. I mean the wife might be put there just out of a convention, and the lover commemorate nothing more than the crisis of a passion. To have done something together, the two of them, and to stand looking out on their achievement — I don't know, but it seems to me something more — more ——"

"More what?"

"Well, doesn't it seem to you that life is such a blink between dark and dark, and that if one

could spend it on something in which one completely believed ——”

“Couldn’t you believe in marriage, then, or romance?”

“Marriage? One might. But I’ve always imagined that most people, if they looked at it squarely, would find that their first faith — I mean the things that they had believed in at the start — had just faded away. And, oh dear me, how many people seem to be left with the habit of life, and a settled income perhaps, and casual proprietary kisses from a dull fat man with an unshaven chin.”

Edward laughed again. How quiet and brief his laughter was! She liked it . . .

“And romance, passion, in-loveness, love?”

“I wouldn’t put love with them, would you? In-loveness? Well, I suppose if you could separate it completely, keep it shut and sealed from the before and the after of it, you might intoxicate yourself with it; that is, if your taste — it would be your taste, wouldn’t it? — would sanction the inebriation?”

“Have you never been in love?”

A long way away in the daylight, the question, she knew, would seem an odd one from so new an acquaintance — impertinent, she vaguely supposed would be the word. But it seemed that these standards, these names, were dissolved in the moonlight. To-morrow morning, a world away, she would inevitably have answered “No,”

but to-night she was reckless enough for truth.

"Yes, once."

"And it turned into nothing?"

"No, not that. I think I did really care too. But I was awfully young. He was killed — and, you see, I can't really know. I thought for a long time that I could *think* it into the tremendous thing, that it would be what my thought made it. But then I understood that if he had lived I couldn't have had it all my own way like that — I'd have had to come to another kind of reckoning."

"Yes, I understand."

"And that's why I like these two. They could measure their friendship, their job together, squarely. They wouldn't have to sift the reality from all that excitement. . . . I wish I'd been a man. I should like to be one of them standing up there looking out on my conquest — Marius or Cæsar. . . . Tell me about them."

"Well, it is a pity to spoil them for you, but Cæsar was a year old (unless he wasn't born at all) when Marius was fighting his battles here — not that I think he ever came as far north as this."

Laura laughed. "You shouldn't have told me that. You have spoiled something that I did so like. In the evenings alone I should often have thought of them."

"Do you live alone? I thought you lived with ——?"

"Claire? Oh, goodness no!"

But suddenly, at the naming of Claire, some of the enchantment left her, and she saw the edge of the daylight in the distance.

"I say, I think it must be most frightfully late. Claire will think I'm lost. I believe I've been standing here for hours"—she gave a nervous giggle that she hated—"talking the most utter nonsense."

"I'll come back too."

They talked as they walked side by side — of the gardens, of the scent of the roses and the honeysuckle, of the pattern of the plane branches on the white road, of the country, of the people. But Laura had no longer the freedom of the enchanted. Everyday came nearer to her with every step that she came nearer to the hotel. Shreds of the magic lingered — she still bore within her the compulsion to an uncompromising truthfulness. As they neared the end of the road she slowed her steps. "It was ridiculous of me to say that I wished I were a man or that I could be a soldier like Marius or Cæsar. I'm an awful coward really — so nervous and idiotic that I shouldn't even travel alone, that I shouldn't even have come here unless Claire had brought me ——"

"That's why you're with Claire. I wondered ——"

"Yes, that's why. Because I'm too dependent, too feeble to move alone."

They were at the door of the hotel now. The

magic had wholly gone. She was compelled now by the everyday. Her voice was different — nervous, hatefully shaky. She tried hard to make it sound casual.

“And really I don’t generally tell people things about myself like this. Indeed, I never — I mean I have talked the most appalling nonsense.”

“I’m glad you talked.” He looked at her with his grave eyes.

He held out his hand to her. “Good-night.”

“Good-night,” she said.

And then, as he held open the glass door for her, she tumbled headlong into a lot of senseless gabble about the lateness, and the brightness of the lights, and everybody being gone to bed.

Everybody had gone up, it seemed, except old Madame, who was yawning on her chair in the caisse. Heavens! how hot the hall was, and how thick the smell of stale food! No wonder Madame looked so greasy and yellow.

“Bon soir, Madame.” Her voice was still uncontrolled.

“Bon soir, Mademoiselle. Vous avez fait une jolie promenade?”

She bowed. Laura bowed. Madame yawned again, and went back to her ledger.

Laura was at the turn of the stairs when the hall door was flung open, and the girl they called Coucou and the three young men came flinging in upon a burst of laughter and chatter.

Madame looked up from her ledger and laughed too.

Coucou was patting her on the arm. "Madame, il faut nous donner le clef — un clef — parce que nous allons jouer encore aux billards, nous n'avons pas fini le jeu et c'est moi qui gagne — et nous promettons (what's 'promise,' Moses? you *might* help) jure — that's it — nous jurons de ne pas disturb (what's 'disturb'?) reveiller anybody ——"

Madame loved it. She was laughing, and beating the girl on the shoulder. "Ah, Mees Coucou, you are a naughty! et si je dis 'non'?"

"Madame, you can't! C'est moi qui gagne — vous comprenez ça?"

Laura went on up the stairs.

She could still hear the voices and the laughter when she had shut the door of her bedroom.

She sat down on the bed. Oh, what a fool she felt! She spread her hands on her burning cheeks. She, at her age, talking nonsense in the moonlight like any schoolgirl!

Nonsense . . . nonsense. . . . Any words she had said to a stranger like that could only really be nonsense. . . .

The man would probably tell Victory every word she had said.

No, he wouldn't — that was a lie.

But how could she, out of her disillusionment, her disbelief . . .

That girl downstairs, with her youth, her

gaiety, her conviction, she could say anything to any one, carry off any sort of nonsense, carry any one off their feet, carry any one anywhere.

She took off her cloak and brushed back her hair. She must go to Claire before she had time to grow nervous of what Claire might say to her.

She tapped gently at Claire's door, and opened it a chink. Her room was dark, thank Heaven.

"Are you asleep, Clairey?"

"Nearly, Laure. Come in."

Laura sat on the edge of Claire's bed, as near to the foot as she dared. Claire stretched out her arms to her.

"I had such an interesting evening, Laure. I really think that poor boy was simply aching to pour himself out to some one with a grain of intelligence."

"I know, Clairey. I thought he might want to burst out to you, and so I went for a walk."

"Well, I think you did *him* a kindness, my chicken — though why you should — Kiss Clairey . . ."

Laura was hotter than ever when she emerged from Claire's embrace and crept across the passage to her own room again.

She felt sick with herself — *sick*. . . .

She pulled off her clothes with passionate haste.

Just as she was tying the ribbon of her night-gown, she heard a scuffle on the path outside her window. "Coucou, you little beast!" The man's lowered voice was quite clear to her.

And then another voice, "Good for you, Coucou; run for it quick." Light steps patting down the path, across the yard, away . . .

Coucou . . . Coucou . . . The silly name sounded in her ears long after she had hidden her face in the pillow.

CHAPTER III

MISS FORSTER was brushing her hair when she heard the commotion in the garden.

Miss Ffrench was hooking the silk underbodice of her blouse.

She was nearly ready, which meant that Miss Forster was very late. But Miss Forster went on brushing. The reason was that there had been a certain softening of Agneta's manner to her that morning — a relentment, so to speak — which had awakened to twittering excitement the little bird in her heart.

The incident had been over their "Daily Lights." It was their custom to read the morning passage in bed. Now the trouble was that Miss Forster was very weak at night. When strong sleep laid hold on her she had no resistance in her. It seemed that she could not put up even the pretence of a fight against it. It was all she could do to drive herself through the absolutely bare necessities of going to bed. No one could guess, for instance, the temptation that she had to fold the clothes at the bottom of the pile less well than those on the top — even, oh dear! not to fold them at all, but to mask them with the ultimate petticoat. Now Miss Ffrench was not in the least like this. She was so much mistress of herself that Miss Forster was ready for bed an age before

Miss Ffrench was prepared for her to be there. This was because Miss Ffrench liked to say her prayers kneeling by her bed, and her prayers were the final action in the ritual of her nightly preparation for sleep, and she did not like to say her prayers by her bed with Miss Forster laid in the twin bed by its side, especially as foreigners did put their twin beds so very close together.

Quite exactly why Miss Ffrench did not like to have her lying next to her while she prayed, Miss Forster did not know. It might be, she decided when she thought it out thoroughly one day, because it felt so like those pictures of some one praying by the dying; or it might have been that it felt as if she were praying *to* her, *before* her ("before" in the Scriptural sense, of course, not "in front of"). It sounded a funny thing to think, but she could imagine that it might quite well feel like that. Or it might be that Agneta did not like to be so nearly overlooked while she communed with Our Lord.

Anyhow, the long and the short of it was that after Miss Forster had said her prayers before (not in the Scriptural sense) the armchair, she had quite a long time in which to wait, to yawn, and to shudder, before she could make for her haven between the bedclothes.

And so this is what happened. In order that she might snuggle down in her pillow and pull the sheet up over her nose the moment that Miss Ffrench had finished with Our Lord, she would

take her "Daily Light" and read the evening passage in her corner, and because she had such a forgetful and careless mind she would leave it there upon the chair, and in the morning when she woke, instead of having it within her reach when the time came for her to read it, there it would be at the other side of the room. Not a very great hardship, any one would say, to get up and fetch it. No, not great at all, of course. And yet — Oh, how lovely, how delicious, how treasurable, were those moments when one first awoke! They were a gap in time when one was neither old nor young, when one wasn't at the mercy of a corn or of rheumatism in the knees, when one hadn't the bother of belonging to any particular face or body. One was just a soft, warm, unindividual being — a little intoxicated, perhaps, by the sensation of a dream which one had just left. Not that she always wanted to prolong those sensations. Oh, dear, no! How could she? For dreams were so very strange. They were sometimes quite vulgar — quite dreadful. There had been that frightful one about the hall porter. It made her blush to remember it. It must be with dreams as it was with anæsthetics. The very nicest people, she had been told, said the strangest things. It went by opposites, perhaps. Perhaps it was only really pure, really refined minds, that had dreams like that. . . .

Anyhow, dream or no dream, she would lie there and watch the armchair where her "Daily

Light" was laid, and wish that she need not get out from the bedclothes and put on her slippers, and resume her personality — become Flora Forster again, so long, so many precious minutes before she need.

And at these times Agneta was adamant.

"Perhaps, Flora, if you have to get out of bed to fetch it often enough you will learn to put it in its proper place," she would say, as she took her copy from the marble-topped commode which Miss Forster's copy should have shared.

And there was no answer, of course, but to get out from between the bedclothes and put on your slippers and fetch it.

And even her slippers pressed on her corn.

But this morning such a lovely thing had happened that she hadn't wanted to linger for a single second on the fringe of her dream. Agneta had read her passage while she delayed, as usual, half in and half out of herself, and then Agneta had held out the book — her copy — to her. "It is quite short this morning. I have finished it, so that you can read it in mine," she had said.

And so Miss Forster brushed and brushed at her hair, and felt sure that in a moment Agneta would say, as she used to say so often in the old days, and as she hadn't said for such weeks and weeks (although they were abroad on a holiday), "What hair it is, isn't it?" or "How dare you keep all this gold in your hair, you frivolous little

Flora?" And the blackbird sang so very loudly on the lilac bush under the window.

And Miss Ffrench knew perfectly well why Miss Forster was brushing and brushing, although she was so late. And she felt that she really might be able to say something this morning.

She had made such a big stride towards it when she had offered Flora her "Daily Light." She did wish so very much that she could say these things more often. Of course Flora must be perfectly aware of her devotion to her. It was unthinkable that she should not be. But all the same she sometimes wondered if Flora saw quite as clearly as she should through those little attacks of nervous irritation from which she suffered.

She simply could not prevent herself, for instance, on those nights when Flora yawned and sighed and fidgeted with sleep in the armchair from adding sometimes as many as three Collects after the Lord's Prayer, where, of course, she normally would have ended. And sometimes in the morning she would find herself actually clenching her teeth as she drove Flora out of bed to fetch her book.

But this morning had been such a good morning. She had woken up without that tic over her left eye which was often so painful, and she had been able to make the offer about the book quite easily and naturally.

She hooked up her bodice as quickly as possible so that she might be able to go up to the dressing-

table to get her brooch, and then, as she leant over the pincushion, she would take a strand of Flora's hair in her fingers and say something loving. And Flora would say something about her, Agneta's, mind, which, although it would be so foolishly exaggerated and so flattering, of course, would make a lovely little warmth between them, and they would have such a happy day — just like one of those days years and years ago when they had first gone sketching together at Cadenabbia.

And then, just as she was ready, just as she was choosing amongst the words, the commotion in the garden put an end to everything.

She felt it to be her duty to look out to see what was happening. The scream might be a real cry for assistance, for all that she could tell. Of course the moment she looked she could see that it was nothing but that terribly vulgar girl misbehaving, as usual, with the young men with whom she seemed to be associated.

One of them was laid full length along the bough of the apple tree which stretched nearly across the path, and as the girl had passed beneath it he had reached down like a great ape and grabbed her by the back of the scarf which she wore tied round her neck. As she watched, the girl wriggled her head through the loop of the scarf, leaving it in the man's hand, and ran off down the path.

And then the most disgusting thing happened. As the girl passed the little hut which was by the

side of the coal heap to the left of the path, the other two young men sprang out from it and seized her each by an arm. Now it was unpleasant enough to see the rough-and-tumble that followed, to watch a grown-up girl scrambling and shouting like a small schoolboy, but what was really disgusting was that she felt convinced that the hut was — was — well, used as a certain apartment. Naturally she would not have mentioned her certainty even to Flora, but she had noticed that Flora had been particular, as she herself had been, to look away from it whenever they had passed it. It was so like foreigners, who have no sense of decency, to put it in such a public position, without even attempting to plant a screen of shrubs around it. And the young men had used it as a hiding-place! Oh, really, it was perfectly outrageous!

Flora had pressed forward to the window, too. Agneta had been obliged to insist upon her keeping a certain distance back from it. She was not in the least sure of those wire shutters. They might seem to obscure the room when one looked up at it from the garden, but, on the other hand, one could not rely on their hiding a figure that was standing right up against them. One could not possibly tell, because when one looked at them from outside one had no means of knowing whether there was any one standing close to them or not.

So she had to be quite sharp with Flora to

prevent her from exposing herself with her hair down. And then, when she remarked to her that that girl and those young men were not fit persons to be in the hotel, Flora had answered in the ridiculous way she did answer sometimes — without thinking at all what she was saying, out of one of those foolish dreams into which she allowed herself to drift — that the girl was very striking looking — very handsome!

Miss Ffrench could have shaken her. If people of education and breeding were to renounce their standards ——!

But Miss Forster did not notice that she was being inexcusably foolish. She was far away in a delicious memory of an opera she had seen once, “*Vie de Bohême*.” Very enthralling — very wild and reckless and daring; but very enthralling.

Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench did not have at all a happy breakfast.

Evie insisted that Laura should go with her to buy the things for the picnic. She felt sure that Laura, dear little thing, should go about as much as possible. She wanted cheering up, and she was so easily amused really. But she was so diffident and so dreadfully sensitive. Vicky had a hide like an elephant. You couldn’t hurt her. She wished that you could, because then you might be able to get at her, to do something with her, to appeal to her feelings. Laura was all feelings — not touchy, of course; but sensitive. And she didn’t really

like that woman — Miss what-was-her-name? — Draycott — Drayton. She overwhelmed Laura, smothered her, gobbled her up. Of course everybody had their good side if you only knew it, and she was a type that she didn't really understand.

They must have a look at the children in the garden before they started, just in case anything wanted seeing to. Billy was walking along the path by the side of Peter. Peter was hearing him recite his Latin. Evie felt that it was less hard on Billy if he did his work out of doors. It made it more in keeping with a holiday, less like ordinary lessons. Billy did so hate learning, and how she did hate having to make him learn! She looked at his darling, distracted face. She could see that he was torn in half between the sulphur butterflies that hopped in front of him from flower to flower along the border and the terribly hard words which Peter was saying. His eyes (they were such an awfully nice pale blue, with sort of yellow freckles in the blue) rolled distractedly from Peter's face to the butterflies and from the butterflies to Peter's face. He never could concentrate, poor darling! It was a mercy that Peter had the heart to go on. But Peter was so young and so stern. Such a darling — such a very dear boy. But easiest, perhaps, when he was ill.

That Christmas when he had had bronchitis he was just like her big son. Ordinarily he was rather stern with her. But, then, it must be very difficult to be so clever. And of course she often

said such silly things — things that he was almost bound to jump on. But, then, she hadn't any brains — not of that sort. Of course that was what was the matter with the children. They had inherited their stupidity from her. All except Victy. Victy had Markham's brains, she supposed.

"It's awful having to make Billy work in the holidays," she said to Laura. Laura was so sympathetic. "But his master says he must. He's so stupid, darling boy. Oh, Laura, it is so hard for any one like me to do their duty! I do wish I was better at it. I'm so afraid of making a mess of the children ——"

She thought of that time last holidays when she had had to give Billy a thrashing. She knew that his father would have done it, and she hadn't shirked. She had thrashed him with a hunting crop and really hurt him. But it had nearly killed her. She had cried herself sick. And she wasn't at all sure that Billy had minded, that he hadn't perhaps laughed at her afterwards.

"So frightfully hard . . . And there's Bun. We must have a look at her before we go."

Bun was sitting in an iron chair in front of one of the iron tables, sewing. Her tongue was out, and her face was red with the effort of poking the needle through the calico. How did Bun always contrive to get her work so filthy?

"Oh, Bun, darling, must you get it so bloody?"

"Must. There's too much flesh on my under

finger, and it gets sewn in at almost every stitch." Bun was such a naughty child about anything like needlework.

"Jolly bad for the cannibals: the smell of human blood is bound to rouse them."

Evie had to laugh, but she had to scold Bun too.

"Oh, Bun, you mustn't be so silly! They're very good people, practically all of them, I expect."

"Well, they'll all be cannibals by the time that they've done with my chemise."

It was naughty of Bun to make fun of the Mission, after all that she had tried to tell her about it. Evie knew that she must be firm and not argue. You must never argue if you could possibly help it.

"Never mind what you think they are, Bun. Just get on with your work. Cousin Laura and I are going out to get the things for the picnic."

But she felt that she must explain to Laura. "Laura dear, you must think me terribly old-fashioned to make the poor child sew for a Mission — I know Missions are absolutely out of fashion — but, you know, I do so want to give them religion of some sort, those two; and I thought if Bun began with the blacks — You see, Vicky hasn't any; and I do think she might be so much happier if she could only believe in something, don't you, Laura? I do think religion's so important, don't you?"

Evie's mind kept still for a moment, and she knew again that somewhere a loving Christ stooped down and took away all the worry and the anxiety and the disappointment — and perhaps all the busyness too. But it was never just above her that He leant. Perhaps if she ever had the time to be quite quiet —

But people talked of religion as a gift — the religious gift — and it wouldn't be for her to have it. She must just go on doing the next thing, and missing Marky. Doing your best for everybody whatever hash you made of it was all that you could do. Probably it was a blessing that she had so many things to see to, that she was always so frightfully busy. . . .

“Marky hadn't it. It was that that made the end so frightfully hard —”

One could tell things to Laura — Laura was so understanding. Perhaps Laura would help her. It was so lonely thinking and worrying all by yourself.

“You see, Laura dear, I mayn't be religious — not have the religious gift, I mean — but I do believe that Marky and I will be together in the end. It couldn't stop like that. He wouldn't say it once, not even to comfort me; but I don't think that that could matter, do you? After all, why should God take any more notice of what we say or think — treat it any more seriously — than we would Billy or Bun?”

Laura didn't say anything, as she had hoped

she might, but she looked at her so kindly. What lovely eyes she had! Deep, you could look down into them — and so sad and kind. She often wondered why Laura hadn't married. . . . But, anyhow, she had brought her out to cheer her up, not to pour out her troubles on her.

"Look at that peep down there, Laura. There's a little Place round that fountain. Isn't it charming?"

It really was attractive. So foreign. And the little boys that were following them — how jolly they were in their blue blouses and with their sabots clattering over the cobbles!

"Evie"— Laura cocked her eyebrows in the funny way she had — "do you think it's your hat or my hair that is so frightfully 'rigolo'? And exactly how bad a word is it as applied to us?"

"'Rigolo'? I don't think there is such a word, is there?"

"Never mind," said Laura. "There are two marvellous herrings across our trail, or rather not herrings. But, look! the two old earwigs."

Yes, there were the two poor old ladies with their camp-stools and their easels, and, sure enough, their boys had joined the other boys who already crowded them.

"Oh, Laura"— Evie felt distressed: she couldn't bear to see the two poor old things badgered like that. But Laura was laughing.

"Do look at the thin one, Evie ! The legs of her

easel are like a daddy-long-legs: they seem to be quite incredibly remote from its body."

Poor old thing! It was quite true: she was revolving the legs of her easel like the arms of a windmill.

It was those boys. She really couldn't stand by and see her so flustered. "I must go and send them away."

But Laura hung on to her sleeve. "Don't go," she begged. "I think the cross one might be awfully cross with you. She'd hate you to think that she couldn't look after herself perfectly."

Laura might be right. But, all the same, Evie did hate leaving them like that. She made up her mind to come back past them on her way in.

She put up her red parasol. The street was baked white with the sun. "Laura, oughtn't you ——?"

But Laura patted her bare head and laughed. She had the skull of a negress, she said.

They stood a long time in front of the window of the pâtisserie, deciding what they would have. It wasn't easy, because they all liked such very different things. Billy and Bun couldn't bear pastry. It was almost the only thing that Victory liked. Edward liked brioches. Peter and Bun had a passion for galettes, but she wasn't sure that they made the right kind here. Sometimes you asked for galettes and they gave you horrid little biscuits secs. The right kind were really Bretonne, but Bun swore that she'd seen one here....

Mille-feuilles. Vicky would love them. But they were so sticky to carry. No use in taking anything that got in too much of a mess. . . . The dry kind — allumettes; yes, they'd be much better. . . . Well, then, four allumettes. How many mille-feuilles? No, no mille-feuilles. Seven brioches. No, one might just as well say a dozen — everybody could eat brioches. . . .

They were still making their list when the door of the shop swung open, and the girl, the lovely girl, was almost on the top of them. She was so perfectly radiant that Evie couldn't help smiling at her, and as she hadn't time to think that she might be the sort of girl who would be bored by being spoken to, she said good-morning to her and asked her if she had been buying cakes.

"Hot croissants!" The girl smiled so friendlily, and lifted the paper from the top of her basket for Evie to see.

And then the fair young man — the really rather good-looking one — came out of the charcuterie next door and called to her, "I've struck some first-rate pâté," and the girl smiled again, and they smiled at her, and Evie said, "I hope you'll have a lovely day," and the girl said "Thank you," so charmingly before she followed the young man down the street.

"She really *is* lovely! Much lovelier when you see her close."

Laura agreed. "Yes, isn't she? She's got the most lovely smile."

"And not a bit made up. I don't think she'd even powdered her nose — did you see her freckles? Such a relief after these lipstick young women; such a dirty habit, I tell Vicky. And that bright red dress — and her bare legs — so natural. I wish Vicky would go without her stockings while she is here. Vicky won't be sporting."

Evie suddenly felt sad. "She looked so happy, Laura. As if she'd have everything in the world that she could want."

"Are you quite sure? Are you sure that her eyes were absolutely happy?"

Funny little Laura! How like her to imagine something that no one else would dream of thinking! But she went off after her own thought again. "Laura, I'm a beast! I've always had the lowest opinion of mothers. All the rot that is talked about them — I'm generally heartily ashamed of them! Do you know, I felt as if I could clutch that girl's happiness away from her to give it to my Vicky! Jealous of her! She mayn't be what you would call good style; she mayn't even be what you might call a good girl. But, you know, I think there's such a lot of nonsense talked about 'living in sin.' I'm not sure it isn't more sinful just to do nothing with your life. Laura, I am so worried over Vicky!"

Oh, dear! When had she not been worried over her?

"Laura" — it would be a relief to tell her this, because she had never told it to any one, and

when Laura laughed at one she laughed so kindly — “do you know, I’ve always had the feeling — you know, you may laugh at me, I shan’t mind a bit, and I do know how ridiculous it sounds — that Victy hadn’t a proper chance at the beginning. Her name, for instance, not being a real Christian name — I know it couldn’t make any difference — but still it seems to me a sign, if you know what I mean.

“You see, she was born the day after the Grand National, when Marky’s horse won. I did so terribly want to be there. And he said that it spoilt it all that I wasn’t. He was like that to me, you know. And then the horse being called ‘Victory the Second,’ and having won as well, he said there was nothing for it but to call the baby ‘Victory’ too. It wasn’t right, I think. But, you know, I was so utterly wrapped up in Markham.

“You don’t remember him, do you, Laura? We used to do everything together — have the most frightfully good time. And, you see, that is what worries me. They talk so much now of pre-natal influences, or is it ante-natal? No, ‘anti’ is ‘against,’ isn’t it? And though I never neglected Victy — I mean she had the best of nurses and governesses and all that — I do feel there wasn’t the same atmosphere” (yes, atmosphere, that was what she meant) “round her at the beginning. And the losing her father, who might have understood her, and being so much

cleverer than me. All that's so bad for her. If only she would marry."

"That Edward man?"

She was glad that Laura had pitched upon Edward. She might perhaps have really noticed something. . . . Evie felt brighter.

"I do think she quite likes him, don't you?" But then her spirits sank again. "But men are all rather selfish, you know, Laura. Do you think he'd be bothered? I mean it's all very well waiting on her on a holiday like this; but marriage!"

Laura obviously didn't know what to say. But, then, she couldn't have had much experience of men.

Anyhow it had been a comfort to talk to her like this — it was so depressing keeping things alone in your mind.

And then, before they knew where they were, they were on the top of the old ladies again, and those wicked boys were being so outrageous that she couldn't possibly help interfering.

She flung herself straight into the midst of them.

Laura felt shamefully inclined to stand back, even — yes, even to slip away. Evie was so frightfully courageous.

She herself was terrified of the boys, terrified of their rudeness, and terrified of the old ladies being offended, or of the cross one being cross.

Evie was pouring out a torrent of sentences at them — sentences as emphatic as they were Anglican. Evie spoke all languages as if they

were her own — that is, with a complete disregard of their native mode.

“Allez-vous-en. Vous êtes très, très méchants. Je vais dire au gendarme comme vous avez renversée” (they had had *crème renversée* the night before, Laura remembered) “ces dames.”

Somehow her energy was effective, if not her words.

The old ladies bowed. They bowed beautifully, like Queen Alexandra used to bow. The cross one was the spokeswoman.

“We are most obliged to you. Miss Forster and myself are perfectly accustomed to foreign travel, but I think the patois they speak here may prevent one from being fully understood. Such an apology for French, is it not? I fear that in future we must not attempt to sketch in the village.”

“And such pretty peeps,” wailed Miss Forster.

“And the hills here are not really very picturesque — so *hard*, are they not? So different from the mountains on the Italian lakes — Lago di Como, for instance. The atmosphere there ——”

“Oh, not at all picturesque! We were most disappointed in them. And we were told that so many artists had come here; but perhaps ——”

“No doubt ——”

“And there are the flowers — the rosemary and the lavender. Such profusion!”

“Oh, heavenly!” Evie could be at one with them over the flowers.

"And that great magenta cistus." Laura poked it in from the edge of the conversation. But they didn't want it at all; perhaps it was too flaunting.

They bowed again, beautifully. Evie bowed, and Laura bowed.

How much Laura felt that she would give to have Evie's courage; or, anyhow, how much she felt that she ought to be ready to give! She did admire it most tremendously.

What she would really have given a great deal for at that moment was to know something about that girl.

Was she right about her eyes, or had she made it up?

Was the girl as happy as she seemed? Did she only imagine that she wasn't because she couldn't imagine any one being as happy as that for more than a moment?

Up there in those white mountains — in the sun — walking over the thyme — adored . . . Oh, probably — no, almost certainly she was happier than anything she could imagine. . . .

Edward lay on his back in the rosemary bush and munched his brioche. The rosemary was like a spring mattress under him. The blue spikes of its flower stuck up on each side of him.

Evie was struggling with the tea. The collapsible cups. The thermos — the thermi. She wouldn't get any tea herself.

Dear Evie! He ought to help her. But he

didn't. He was absorbed in the pattern made by the shrill green shoots of the almond tree against the grey feathers of the olives.

A spike of rosemary tickled his nose. He rolled over sideways. Laura . . . Yes, it was quite a good name. Funny, shy, untidy creature. He didn't like women to be untidy. He liked them to have — style? No, that wasn't it. "Stylish," and you were in Suburbia at once. What was the word? "Smart"? No, that took you to the endlessly duplicated young woman of to-day — the slender tube on flesh-coloured legs, with orange mouth, wire eyebrows, eyelashes gummed in points. God! how he hated her! No, smartness had nothing to do with it. "Distinction"?

Yes, "distinction" would do. He liked the ladies of Henry James, who wore their delightful little bonnets with such discretion. Madame de Mauves, for instance — yes, most particularly Madame de Mauves; the ladies of Proust at home in their perfection of hat and frock. Distinction. . . . This funny untidy creature had it in a way. You noticed her. You felt a difference when she came into a room. There was something about her — reminiscent. Well, weren't all one's visual impressions reminiscences of something that some one had already seen for one? Very few people — and they were the creative artists — saw anything for the first time for themselves. Well, then, where did she come from? What was she? Sylvan? Not classic in the least.

The sylvaninity of the cinque cento, perhaps. He thought of the nymphs of Florence.

She had not the flower-face, and she had not the empty-eyed look; she was less vacant. As a matter of fact she was quite intelligent for a woman. And honest. Honesty was, after all, the great thing. He definitely liked her. He would ask her to go for a walk with him after tea.

She was obviously pleased when he asked her. He did not suppose that men had often taken her for walks.

He talked of books to her. To find out what she read (if she read at all) was always a quick way into a woman's mind.

With a man you could talk of experiences; but a woman seldom had any — or they were of such an intimate nature. . . .

He found her surprisingly sound. He had feared, from the look of her, that she might be the sort of young woman who found Tagore "so spiritual," and Synge delicious, and who would quote "Inisfree" at you at the thought of a lake.

He felt that she might so easily say that she didn't care much for novels — "it was so difficult to find one that one could really like" — but that she loved "a nice biography."

No, she enjoyed "Tom Jones," knew her Swift, had Borrow almost by heart, couldn't think of a single Balzac that she found a word too long, admired Anatole France (though she didn't per-

haps exactly chuckle at him as she might), had kept her childhood's passion for the "Waverley Novels," couldn't see how you could bear to miss Dickens. . . .

And then they began to climb in earnest, and there is nothing like sweating together to make you friendly. Sweat! Some one ought to write an essay on it. There was far more to it than you might think.

Laura tugged herself up by the rosemary bushes, slipped down on her face in the loose shale, panting, scrambling, tumbling; she was years younger. She was more on her hands and knees than on her feet up the last lap. It was a fairly stiff pull up. But when they got to the top, by Jove! it was worth it. The whole of the Camargue was spread before their promontory. At the further edge you could imagine the Mediterranean.

Laura pulled off her hat and mopped her forehead with her handkerchief. She looked like a young girl — pink-faced, dark-eyed. He hadn't had a notion that she could look like that.

She lay down on the shale, and spread her arms wide like a crucifix. He stretched himself by her side.

The sun baked down on them, but a little cool air stole across from the Camargue — from the sea, perhaps — and caressed them deliciously.

"This is pretty good," he said at last. "I haven't been anywhere as good since I was a boy."

"Did you go abroad a lot when you were young?"

"No. Austria — the Tyrol — when I was about sixteen; but I suppose one's first mountain is always one's most marvellous."

And yet he wasn't at all sure that he would have found this half as beautiful at sixteen as he found it to-day. He could imagine himself pre-occupied by asserting the pottiness of the climb, assuring himself that though one could see a good way it wasn't much of a view, because one was nothing of a height up.

"Did you have an awfully good time when you were young?"

He sat up, and pulled his hat over his nose and looked down at her. She had torn a great hole in her stocking in the climb, and a trickle of blood was still creeping down her shin. He was rather touched by it.

"If I had a good time when I was young? Just as good as I was capable of having, I expect."

"Tell me about it."

"What! My life's history!" He looked at her humorously.

"Yes, just that." She smiled straight up at him in the nice frank way she had. "You can't think how I adore hearing about people's lives!"

"Well, mind if I smoke?"

He wriggled himself back until he found a stone for his back, lit his pipe and sucked at it.

Good God! How on earth should he begin?

If he'd had time to think of it, he might have produced something rather witty.

Never mind! He didn't suppose she was particularly critical. She was a nice little creature. Anything would amuse her.

Where should he begin?

He looked back at the long panorama. How incredibly far away was that boy who had climbed the mountain in Austria!

And then there was a further distance behind him. But no, he couldn't be bothered with that.

He looked at the boy, at the places round the boy, at the people.

When he had come down from his mountain he had gone home to — Ah, yes, now he knew!

"You ask me if I had a good time as a boy. Well, it might have been as good a time as anybody's, I think, if it hadn't been for my mother's kisses. They wrecked my happiness. No, you mustn't laugh! It is bitterly true.

"My mother is a woman who cannot help venting her affections on people, and naturally her nearest and dearest were her most constant victims. Now, by some damnable perversity of nature, I was born with a congenital loathing of caresses, and particularly of proprietary ones. I have always been shocked at the way some women regard children (like they regard the poor), as the natural and willing recipients of their kindnesses.

"You don't find that attitude in men — or very seldom.

"Poor children! Poor 'poor'! I think I suffered for them nearly as fiercely as I suffered for myself!

"It began from the very beginning. I couldn't play a game without my mother trying to join in it. And, supposing I were playing marbles, she had only to say to me, 'Show Mother all the lovely marbles, Weddie darling,' for the game to be at an end and for me to stuff the marbles into my pocket, sit on them — anything to protect them.

"And later on I would go as far as to try to miss my train home from school to avoid the hurt 'No kiss for your mother after all this time?'

"And you can't think how many opportunities there are for greetings during a normal day until you have lived in the house with my mother. There are not only coming down in the morning and going to bed in the evening, but there is going out for a walk, coming in from a walk. The whole day, in fact, seems to be reduced to one long hail and farewell.

"And then the poor! I can still hear my mother telling me how she had been to see her factory girls dance — young men and all. *So* enlightened! And how some Jemima Jones had rushed up to her and taken her hand and told her that it had made the whole difference to their

evening to have her there. I used to walk up and down my bedroom stamping with rage, and cursing the filthy, crawling, sycophantish Jemima!"

"Your poor mother!" She seemed to be really rather sorry for her.

"Well, I suppose her upbringing was largely to blame. I think that the Victorians had a genius for the suppression of truthful thinking. They bred for their own satisfaction, and then assured their children that they had done something noble in bringing them into the world. They brought them up in the way that they themselves admired and found convenient, regardless of the children's predilections and inclinations, and then declared that they had 'done everything for them.'

"I believe, as a matter of fact, that it was my mother's generation who invented little children. Who ever heard of them before? Of little foot-steps on the floors, the empty cradle, or the little ones' hour? They didn't exist in the Middle Ages; they didn't exist even as late as the Georges. Yes, it is obviously true that my mother — or could it have been my mother's mother in her old age? — no, my mother and her sisters, invented them.

"I'm afraid they didn't invent the poor; but they did patronise them in a new way. And instead of admitting the pleasure of patronage, they took it for granted that they acquired merit by it.

"Why, even to-day my mother will tell me that she has had 'such a day'; that, let us say, 'all the women of Essex' have been up to interview her (everything she does is a little over life-size to my mother). And if I answer that she must have found that most enjoyable, she will be horrified, and assure me at once that she is worn out, and that she did it entirely for the Fatherless Babies, or the Fallen Women, or whatever is her excitement of the moment."

"But that couldn't have been all the time!"

"Perhaps not. But, all the same, you can't well imagine how very much of life it overshadowed."

"Try to think that one couldn't even read a book without her wanting to know how one liked it, or what it was about; that one couldn't even see a friend without her wanting to know who the friend was and what one had talked about."

"Her insatiable greed for affection — but greed sounds rather beastly: let's call it her demand for affection — pursued me everywhere."

"Then why didn't you go away?"

"Pertinent question! Partly from laziness, partly because I'm fond of the place — the country, and partly because I'm so damnably fond of her. Um! that's the worst of it. If she would cease to ask for my affection I feel that I should positively overwhelm her with it."

"How disgustingly perverse you are!" She had turned her head to look at him.

"Yes, filthily! Don't imagine I don't know it."

"And what about your father? You have got one, haven't you?"

"Yes, rather. Have had, I mean. I think my mother must have kissed him out of existence before I was born. I never met him as a human entity, but only as a patient shadow who reminded me, 'I think your mother would like you to ——' and so on. Or as an impatient one, who, after too large a dose of the Fatherless Babies or Fallen Sisters, would shut himself in his study with what mother called his 'work.' It was always supposed to be some sort of scientific thesis. I never knew what. He had given up his serious work soon after his marriage — he had plenty of money. All I knew was that his study had rows of French novels and that he kept the windows tight shut whatever the weather. I always supposed that he read French, not from any taste for it, or because he felt an affinity with the Gallic mind, but simply because my mother couldn't. In common with most of the women of her class and day, she is almost entirely uneducated."

"Yes, but the rest? You are only giving me a corner of the picture."

"Ah, but the rest. One couldn't talk to her about that. There one got into the realm of things that one cared for in a perfectly different sort of way: school, college, work, competition, and the excitement of any little successes that

came along." He waved his pipe in vague circles.

"And?"

"Friendship. Oh yes, friendship — the best of all things. And work. Work can be pretty good."

"Tell me about it, will you?"

"Yes, I will some day." He did really feel as if he might. But he wasn't going to now.

"Look here, I've told my fair share. What about you? It's your turn, you know."

"Oh, but must I? My story would be so horribly *raw*. I shouldn't be able to attempt to make it amusing, to decorate it in any way."

That was nice of her. "Yes, you must. Come on, play fair."

She sat up, and propping her elbows on her knees, screened her face with her hands.

"Oh, but I don't think I've got any story really." Whether she had a story that she could tell, that was the question.

"I didn't mean to pester you," he was quick to reassure her. "Don't talk if you don't feel like it."

She was silent for a moment, and then, "But, you know, I do want to really."

Yes, it would be rather exciting to try — rather fun if it did interest him a little.

"I should like to tell you what I remember of my childhood and when I was young. I do often tell it to myself — make a story of it to myself — but not to people. But then, after all, it would be very seldom that people would want to hear it.

"But it won't be a true story." She pushed her hair back from her forehead and clasped her head for a moment with both hands, in her effort to press to the meaning of her thought. "It can't possibly be really true, because directly I tell it, even to myself, I have to see myself as a person, like this or like that; have to cast myself for a particular part in the play; have to see myself making a shape against the background, a definite shape like that pine has against the rock — and really and truly I don't know who I am, or if I have any shape of my own. And it will be worse telling some one else — worse than telling the story to myself, I mean. I shall be bound to make the part better, give myself better lines, you know."

"All right. Go on." He was laughing at her.

"In the beginning ——" She leant back to see his face. "You promise only to listen while it amuses you, and directly you are bored just go to sleep and know I shan't feel offended?"

"Promise!"

"Well, in the beginning I was born just in time not to interfere with the shooting-parties for which my mother had accepted invitations — only just in time, because I always remember hearing Mother complain that she hadn't been strong enough to stalk that year, though she could manage a day's shooting all right.

"Lellie, who was four years older than me, had done far worse. She had been born in Ascot week,

right at the end of the Season. She always said that if Mother could have forgiven everything else, she'd never have forgiven that."

But, oh, Lord! here she was trying to be as amusing as she could — and pretty cheaply amusing at that. She must try to get on to the truth.

"Lellie was born lame — not just limping — with something really wrong. And her poor darling face had that funny, twisted look.

"We were awfully happy, she and I, when we were alone at Malveries. Mother didn't bother about governesses for us for a long time. We ran wild — really wild, because Lellie was, in character, the boy that Mother had meant to have. No, not in character — that's wrong: Mother would have hated her cleverness even in a boy. In her courage, I mean. She was terrifically brave, absolutely the opposite to me. She'd do anything that she thought of doing; she wouldn't let her lameness stop her anywhere. She would climb the highest trees, or take our home-made boat over the waterfall in the river. She didn't care a dash how she was hurt, or how ill she was afterwards."

"Then she got a good bit out of life, despite everything?"

"Yes, I think she was happy. Well, it was like you said — she was as happy as she could be. And it was the same with me. Only I'm not sure if I was ever really very happy, except for moments. I think I was mostly too frightened.

It wasn't only funk — physical fear, you know: the kind that made it agony for me when Lellie walked along the top of the kitchen garden wall, or when I had to walk after her there. I was more frightened of God, whom I knew, from Nannie's Sunday stories, was hovering just above us, ready to drop some awful punishment on Lellie for her wickedness. One of the first things I remember is creeping out of my cot in the middle of the night to touch Lellie in hers, for fear that God had turned her into a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife."

"What a wise nurse you must have had!"

"Well, Lellie *was* 'wicked,' you see. And some special devil always possessed her when they were at home — Mother and Father, I mean.

"They weren't at home much, but when they were, the house was generally filled with people. We kept out of their way as much as we could — our days became a sort of hide-and-seek with them — but sometimes, and especially if they were relations, they would ask to 'have the children down' after tea. Then we were done for! I think the drawing-room door always seemed to me, even when I was grown up, like the door into Hell. I can still feel myself standing in front of it, sick with apprehension, tugging and begging Lellie 'not to.' For Lellie would flaunt herself at Mother, especially when there was an audience. She would limp as she never limped when she was alone, hunch her shoulders,

make grimaces. Heavens, how I minded it! Minded for her and for me.

"I never thought of minding for Mother. But I expect she hated it, and that's why I heard — oh, the most awful thing of all my childhood! She was raging at Nannie, telling her to keep Lellie out of the way when there were people there, and she said ——" Oh, but she couldn't say the words even now! "She called Lellie deformed. I never forgot it. And when Nannie sent Lellie to bed after tea that day as a punishment for something or other, and tried to make me go down to the drawing-room alone, I kicked and bit her like a fury.

"Now, already I've made you look at a wrong picture. I can see what I've painted for you. The sensitive, devoted child suffering for the unfortunate sister, refusing to take what the other couldn't have!

"It wasn't a bit like that. There was a time, much later — I was sixteen or seventeen, perhaps — when Lellie was packed away for a long visit to an aunt, and Mother tried 'to make something of me.' I remember a particular evening when there was a dinner-party and some of the people were to be young people, for my benefit. With half my mind I refused what Lellie would have scorned, but with the other half I was thrilled. I even curled my fringe with a hot hairpin! I can still remember the sort of fried-parsley effect which I achieved; and I remember turning about

in front of the glass and trying to think that there was something in my looks.

"But the moment I stood in front of the drawing-room door it all went. There was nothing left of me. I slunk into a corner.

"At dinner I couldn't say a word; I couldn't even hear what the young men on either side of me said to me. I answered 'Yes' and 'No' at random. When at last I got away to bed I cried bitterly at my failure. And, do you know, I could still feel uncomfortable about it to this day!

"But if I hadn't failed, if I'd been a success . . . Why, once — oh, but I think it was more than once — I remember finding myself in the middle of a day-dream in which Lellie was dead, and Mother took me about with her, and gradually I was blossoming out. People even admired my hair! Oh, you can imagine . . .

"And yet, you know, I really adored Lellie. She was my whole life.

"Perhaps Father might have meant something to us if we had let him. I don't know what he was like, really. To look at he was tall and pale and watery-looking — rather like me, only I'm not tall.

"Lellie said that his life's work consisted in following Mother about, and in wearing the right clothes at the right moment.

"Lellie said that Mother must have married him for his name and his place. She had a theory that Garden of Malveries was just the name that

Mother needed — quiet, respectable, ‘good,’ without being in the least smart or grand. She said that Mother hadn’t the brains to shine.”

Oh, but she didn’t want to make any more of that shoddy sort of fuss!

After all, Lellie was a child when she had said these things.

“Father she saw as merely ridiculous. I haven’t an idea whether she knew anything about him. I hadn’t a notion of him. But I believe now that he may sometimes have wanted to make friends with us.

“I remember one night when Lellie and I were out star-hunting and we came on him strolling alone at the end of the long border. He seemed to want to speak to us, and he began to say something about the ‘constellations.’ But unfortunately it sounded so pompous (he always used the wrong words, the grand ones, you know) that Lellie screamed with laughter and ran away. And of course I ran away too. Poor Father!

“But these things didn’t often happen, because we were generally alone at Malveries. Lellie and I and a governess. The governesses came and went. They didn’t matter much to us, one way or the other. Lellie read everything that she could lay her hands on, anything and everything, and made me read too. Do you know, I think that Lellie was a very brilliant person really, that if she had had a proper chance she would have grown into the sort of woman who could have

done things. Her mind was like a sharp knife. She thought straight through everything."

Heavens! how impatient she had often been of the hazy muddle of her mind. She was fairly hazy to this day. . . .

"And she was never afraid, and I was always afraid. You see, it was just the same with me all the time. I no longer saw the Old Gentleman in the sky waiting to drop punishments on Lellie's head, but I saw him there threatening me through her. It can't be right to suffer so. . . . I suppose nowadays they'd analyse my fear, try to explain it away. I wonder if they could!

"If she rode the old mowing pony; if she was out alone, and stayed away longer than I expected. . . ."

She leant back to see his face.

"Have you ever been afraid in that way? Do you know what it is like?"

"Not often. But I do know."

She was glad that he understood.

"But we *were* happy. I *was* happy. It was the happiest part of my life. There were times I shall never forget. Lovely things. Lying in sun all the morning through on the path between the borders of pinks. Autumn evenings when Lellie and I munched windfalls in the kitchen garden, and the starlings whirled up into a chimney over our heads before they settled with a great clap on the big walnut tree. Oh, aren't they enchanting when they play like that!

Evenings when we lay out on the edge of the long spinney and watched a hare dance along the plough within a few feet of us. Do you know the fearfully slow way he dances? We *were* happy!

“And then the War came, and Mother came home and made Malveries into a hospital and herself into its Commandant.

“Lellie and I went to London. We weren’t wanted at Malveries.

“We took a room at a woman’s club. We had an awful business finding work — because of Lellie, of course. She rouged her poor darling face, and walked marvellously, with scarcely a limp, but it was ages before we could persuade any one that she was strong enough. At last we got the most unlikely job, in a munitions factory. I don’t know how Lellie managed it. I think she willed the manager into taking us. Of course it was crazy work for her. And with her brain I should think she would have been invaluable as a secretary to some one, or in a Government office. But I think she loved the munitions. There was something about it that satisfied the flaunt in her, especially when there were air raids.

“I do believe the night when they dropped bombs within a few yards of us was one of the happiest times of her life.

“And then they changed our shifts — gave her day and me night.

“She was furious, but she dared not make a

fuss. She had fainted twice at her bench, and she was terrified of the Welfare Worker. I was thankful that she was put on to day work. It seemed less hard for her: she could sleep better at night — and it was safer.

“Most of the raids came during the night shift. What I minded was that we scarcely saw each other. And it was because I didn’t see her, and because I was alone all day ——”

Oh, but must she tell him the rest? She didn’t know that she could bear to. And yet she’d got so far now that there seemed no other way out. She must tell it very quickly, make it as short as she possibly could.

“We had a cousin in hospital in London — wounded. Mother made me promise that I would go to see him. (I used to get up and go out for a bit each afternoon.) It was agony going to the hospital. I shall never forget the door of the ward; it was the drawing-room door again, only far worse. At the beginning, I mean, it was like that; for in the end, you see, it was he — he was the person who fell in love with me, whom I fell in love with.

“I didn’t tell Lellie. All the time I knew that I belonged to her, that I could never leave her alone. And yet I couldn’t give up the other.

“And then Lellie got influenza.

“And then his leave was up and he had to go back. . . .

“I stopped work to nurse Lellie.

"I only had one letter, because then he was killed.

"Lellie died two days afterwards. . . . That's the end."

She pressed her fingers on her lips, steadying them.

There was a long silence.

At last, "Poor Laura!" he said, and his voice was so gentle, so touched, that it thrilled in her.

But the thrill disturbed her. Could it be that she was making a sort of satisfaction out of Lellie's story — making — oh, making *copy* out of her for her own excitement?

She stood up. "I wish I hadn't talked," she said. "I *hate* having told about her!" And, without looking at him, she was off down the goat track, slithering and scrambling over the rocks between the rosemary bushes.

She stopped at last and sat down on a flat-topped rock.

Oh, dear! how horribly self-conscious it must have seemed for her to run away like that! Schoolgirlish! She did so wish that she needn't have done it. But there it was. Her need for escape had been too great. She'd had to get away — physically as well as mentally. The truth was that she was no good for friendship, that she couldn't make contacts, *real* contacts, without feeling that she was betraying something that was — no, not herself — something much

more precious than herself: the thing that was her closest, her ultimate possession.

Lellie . . . Lellie . . . She couldn't bear to get an ounce of pity through Lellie — Lellie, who hadn't an ounce of compassion for herself, who wouldn't suffer herself to be pitied for a moment, by any one, ever.

Darling Lellie! . . . She'd had a fling at her when she was dying, almost at the last, jeered at her for something. . . .

And she, Laura, had made sentimental copy out of her!

Not that she'd meant to. It was only that she couldn't manage to be with people without losing something of truth. That was it. To be perfectly true she had to be alone, to be quiet and solitary in her mind. Well, that was her misfortune, there was no sense in making a fuss about it.

She began to feel happier.

She had hold of herself again by the time that she heard him coming down the track behind her. She got up and went to meet him with a perfectly sensible smile.

"I've got your hat." He waved it at her.

"Oh" — she clapped her hands to her head — "I didn't know I hadn't got it on. I'm a lunatic about hats! I took mine off once on the top of a 'bus because it was tight and my head ached, and I left it there. And I couldn't think why people stared at me. I thought I must have got

a particularly humorous smut on my nose. I do collect smuts in such a wholesale way!"

"I've got my weaknesses in that line too. My hair stands on end with the slightest provocation." He stroked the feather which reared itself from the crest of his head.

"I must say there are times when I envy spick-and-span-ness more than any gift on earth. When I tumble out of a sleeper after a night journey, with all the black of the engine stuck on my face and hands, grey and greasy and rumpled, and some one like Victory emerges from the next compartment looking just as if she's stepped out of a shop window — Victory never suffers from the squalors of the flesh, nor would that girl in the hotel — Coucou."

"You've watched her?"

"How could one help it? She holds the stage wherever she is."

"Yes, doesn't she? It's her tremendous vitality, and her really gorgeous youth. The kind of youth the poets sing, not mere immaturity."

"Yes, I believe there's something rather marvellous about her; there is about her looks, anyway. But what will happen to her? She can't grow old?"

"I suppose she will. She'll probably marry one of those young gallants that she goes about with, and settle down in Hampstead or St. John's Wood, and have six children — no, I suppose they

will be just two, a Peter, and a Jane or Anne — and if ever we see her again she'll be a matron."

"One of those inhuman objects like sea-lions on end that you see in the advertisements? Oh, no, she won't!" Laura was suddenly perfectly certain. "I *know* she won't. You couldn't think of her like that any more than you could think of 'White Iope, Blithe Helen and the rest.' Don't let's try to spoil her with that sort of lies! I do really believe that there's something special about her, something rather rare. Don't you see it? I wish I knew who she was and what she's doing here. Do you imagine that one of those young men is her brother?"

"No, my poor Victorian, I shouldn't think so. Why should he be? I put them as art students off for a holiday together. I don't imagine she is in any way interesting; she's just splendid to watch as a completely healthy young animal."

"I daresay it is as a completely healthy young animal that she seems so splendid to me; she's so marvellously happy."

"Yes, and I think it is just her complete happiness that prevents her from being interesting. If you come to think of it, no completely happy heroine every really intrigues you, does she?"

"Doesn't she? What a horrid thought!"

"Well, think! Who do you love best — say, in fiction?"

"Um! Who? Belle Berners; and she was always being made to weep and cry! And oh,

far worse!—the Duchess of Malfi.” Laura laughed. “But I don’t believe it’s true. It’s only because I can’t think of the right people. Happiness ought to be far more interesting than anything, because it’s so frightfully rare. Look what dreary lives most people have, or what mingy ones! Think of being Miss Forster or Miss Ffrench!

“Anyhow, this girl’s happiness seems intoxicating; you’ve only got to see her with people to know that. You watch the waiters, or Madame; they’re quite different the moment she comes near them.”

“Well, but —— Hullo! isn’t that the very young woman herself? Look, up there!”

He pointed away to the right of them, where a sheer cliff of limestone was flat-topped for a long way, and then suddenly overhung by one of the higher peaks. One great rock leant forward from the rest, and a jagged tongue, like a blown flame, bent outwards over the wall of the cliff.

She followed Edward’s pointing. Yes, that was the girl, sure enough, climbing upwards and outwards along the overhanging tongue. Her red dress was sharply clear against the white limestone.

“She climbs like a cat!”

“I wish she wouldn’t. It’s horribly dangerous. Oh, what is she doing?” Laura clenched her hands.

The red figure had reached the top, and stood suddenly upright. For a couple of yards, perhaps, the sharp blade of the rock jutted before her over the cliff. She stepped forward.

"Oh!" Laura gripped his arm with all her strength. She felt sickeningly sure that the girl was going to walk straight on over the edge.

Edward was rigid.

"Whee-ew!" A long, shrill whistle cut the silence.

The girl stood still as a stone for a moment. Then Laura thought that she saw her sway. Then she turned. Then she almost ran back for three or four steps to the broadening of the tongue, and then she seemed to collapse in a huddle on the rock.

"Good God!" said Edward. She could feel his breath go out of him.

Her knees felt weak, and she sat down on her flat stone.

"Whee-ew!" The whistle again. There was the man climbing up the shoulder in the girl's tracks. He had nearly reached her.

"Has she fainted?"

"I hope not. It would be a job to get her down."

But there was no question of that. By the time the man had got to her she was on her feet again by his side. They saw her shake back her hair, and heard her laugh.

"*Laughing!*" It was almost more than Laura

could bear after her fright. "Didn't you think ——"

"That she was going over — meant to?"

"I did. Do you think we were mad? What made us both think it?"

"We evidently were mad. The girl was just larking. Doing it to scare the young man, perhaps."

"But it was pretty dangerous, wasn't it?"

"Damnably! I only hope he gives her hell!"

"I don't suppose she'll care if he does. Look at them!"

The red girl and the brown man were making their way slowly up over the shoulder. The girl led. She was working her way along the traverses of the rock, pulling herself up with her arms, climbing beautifully. Soon they were out of sight.

"Dear, oh dear! I wish she hadn't given me such a fright."

Laura's knees still had a gap between them.

"Let's walk on a bit and forget about her. There is a lake down there."

Laura tried hard as they clambered down to steady her thoughts again. The lake helped her — the surprise of the water shining between the pine trunks.

When they stood looking down into it it was deep green crystal, marvellously coloured as only enclosed water can be.

"It is no use for bathing. Too cold. They say that three men were drowned in it last year."

"Perhaps they couldn't swim. Visitors who get drowned never can, can they? It goes down very steeply between these hills. I should be out of my depth in three or four steps."

"No, they could swim all right — or, anyway, the story says they could. It was the cold."

"That gave them cramp?"

"No, just made them unconscious, I think."

She knelt on the bank and dabbled her fingers in the water. It was icy. Tiny unprogressive waves lapped against the stones.

She looked up at him, and liked his long, brown face among the pine boughs, and he looked down at her so kindly.

"Do you know," she said, "that you didn't tell me of a single lovely thing in all your story! As for mine, I just plunged along through the happenings: 'Once upon a time there were two sisters.' I didn't try to make it more than that. But you chose out things, and you chose nothing but the rubbish. You fished out all the stupid absurdities and dangled them at me. And if there was anything else, I must guess for myself."

"Perfectly true!" He did regret that he hadn't told her something of the other part.

"It is such a jolly sight easier to make things ugly or stupid or absurd than it is to make them lovely or wise or relevant."

"Perfectly true!"

"You mean perfectly obvious. But why do so many clever people do it? I don't mean only

you, now, but the people who write or paint or make music. Is it because they are afraid of being laughed at?"

"That is certainly one of the most compelling fears in life."

"But it is such a lie. Life isn't a kennel or a muck-heap."

"Not entirely, perhaps."

"Not what matters in it isn't. I don't believe that even a tomcat is entirely taken up with his tomishness. And I'm certain that when we come to die, or in any supreme moment — perhaps dying isn't at all supreme, but just confusion or pain — we shan't remember — oh, *muck*; but something — some moment."

"Some emotion?"

She looked out across the green, glassy lake.

"Isn't it when emotion and thought are exactly together — one — that one knows beauty? Or is it because I can't think properly, haven't the power, that my thought has to be sustained — no, stimulated (isn't that a better word?) by my emotion?"

"That may be quite true, my little philosopher."

"Laugh at me! But what do you remember as most treasurable in your life?"

"Moments. Quite true, my dear."

"I remember when I heard them sing the 'Western Wind' in Westminster Cathedral. Have you ever heard it?"

He shook his head.

"It *is* like a wind. And the Holy Spirit goes creeping on it through those vast grey spaces, round the pillars, through the arches — whispering, wandering. But do you know what you would have told me of if you had been there? Why, of the old Chelsea pensioner I sat next to, who stank of whisky and groaned over his rosary."

"Yes, I expect so."

"Or the Beethoven Mass? (I sound extraordinarily churchy!) Have you ever heard that?"

"Yes, once."

"Well, do you remember the 'Agnus Dei'? Now, if you could tell how the lovely Lamb of God comes down on those notes, those slow harmonies. And how the music grows heavy and heavier with the weight of our sin. (Oh, how can we bear that our sin should weigh like that!) But you wouldn't, you know you wouldn't. You'd tell me instead how the old women grovel."

"Quite true."

"But must it be so? How I wish I could write or paint or do something creative! I'd take the truth of beauty and spread it through a book or a picture."

"Try it in everyday life." He was laughing at her. "Meet me every morning, Laura — I'm going to call you 'Laura,' you know — and say to me, 'Edward, it is spring in Provence!'"

"Spring in Provence! Yes, but how lovely! It's just what I would say, if I could. Only I should have to mean it so tremendously, think it

so completely, that I should make it new to you every time I said it. But can't you see? Oh, I don't mind a bit how you laugh! Can't you see how beautiful it would be if I could do it? If I could make you feel the lovely spring coming again and again, and we knowing it for such and such a space, and then no more. But the spring coming just the same since old Roman Cæsar felt the sun here and smelt the thyme. Slop? But only because I'm no artist, because I can't re-create it for you."

"Never mind! Try saying it over and over again. Most religions lay great store by repetition. Say it slowly and lovingly. 'Spring in Provence'!"

It was not until they discovered how frightfully late they were that Laura remembered about Claire. Claire would be back from Avignon, and she would not be there to meet her.

In the first place, she ought to have insisted on going with her, and now she wouldn't even be there when she returned.

Oh dear, oh dear! What a selfish beast she was!

And she hadn't said a word about her. That was so like her, too — to gabble about herself, to talk all that wash, and not to say a word about Claire.

"Listen!" They were slapping down the road at a great pace, and she had not much breath to spare, but it must be said. "I absolutely must tell you about Claire."

"Claire?" He made a funny face at her.

"Yes, I know. That's just how you would say it. And I go gassing away, all that high-falutin stuff, and don't find a minute to tell you about all that she did for me.

"When I ran away like I did — and I did feel so ashamed of myself for behaving like that — I ought to have stopped and told you that if it hadn't been for Claire I shouldn't have got through at all. She was marvellous to me. I owe everything to her.

"In that time when I didn't know what I was doing (and even if I had had possession of my normal senses I should have been perfectly helpless) she did everything for me. She made all the arrangements for the — for Lellie. She was living in our club, you see, and when she heard, she just took everything into her hands as if we had belonged to her.

"I always thought that I might have gone mad if it had not been for her. I know people talk very easily of going mad, just as they do of suicide. And they say, don't they? that no one who says he is going to commit suicide ever really does it? But all the same I think I wasn't very sane in those months, and Claire just held on to me."

"You poor little Laura! But what on earth were your people doing?"

"Father was in France taking out a draft to his Yeomanry regiment — it was as near as he

ever got to being actually in the war — and Mother — Oh, Mother was so frightfully busy with her officers.”

“So they just left you to it, all alone?”

“Well, I should have been all alone if it hadn’t been for Claire. I hardly knew her then. Lellie had laughed at her, of course, but I just let her take charge of me.

“It was she who made me work again. I did a bit of training in shorthand and typing, and she got me into a Government office. I shouldn’t think I was much good, but it got through the days for me.”

“Didn’t you go home at all?”

“No, never at all. Father fell through the greenhouse roof himself just after the Armistice. Wasn’t it pathetically ridiculous of him? And Mother stayed at Malveries as long as her officers stayed, and then she sold it.”

“And you don’t live with her?”

“Goodness, no! Mother’s about thirty; she wouldn’t a bit like to be seen about with a daughter as old as me. And she’d hate living with some one so much older. But, look here, the last thing I wanted to do was to talk about me again. What I do want to say, what I did want to impress on you, is that the next time Claire doesn’t fit in with your taste, just try to remember what a marvellously chivalrous person she is.”

But Edward was perfectly hopeless. He would do nothing but laugh at her.

By a miracle — a joyful miracle — Claire wasn't in the least cross or hurt with her.

She was ready for dinner — waiting in the hall — but she hadn't a word or a look of reproach.

She had found the most intoxicating book in Avignon — “Diane de Poitiers.” She had always worshipped her, and now she was more head over ears than ever.

“Listen, Laura!

‘Dans votre lit, tombeau de la vertu des femmes,
Vous avez froidement sous vos baisers infâmes,
Terni flétri souillé déshonoré brisé,
Diane de Poitiers, Comtesse de Brézé!’”

But Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench were just passing through the hall on their way into dinner. Laura did so hope that they hadn't heard. She got quite muddled in her bows to them.

“Oh, Clairey!”

And she had to rush off. She didn't dress: she washed and tidied.

They had begun, as she had begged them to.

The *salle-à-manger* was like an oven. She supposed that it was after the wind outside. Edward looked nearly as hot as she felt. The lights blared at her. And the noise! Surely everybody was shouting? Certainly the girl, Coucou, was making enough row for a dozen people. She was wild with spirits.

The young men yelled with laughter at her sallies. Oreste couldn't get on with his waiting because every other minute he had to dash across

to their table to hang over her chair, to share in the fringe of some joke. "Ah, mais Mam'selle Coucou!"

They could hear him right across the room.

Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench sent their furious glances after him in vain. Miss Ffrench was even reduced, after waiting in vain for her salad, to tapping on the table with the handle of her knife.

CHAPTER IV

PETER had made a fair copy of his poem upon a piece of the hotel notepaper.

He had pushed up the wire shutter of his window, and the gold sun flooded over him through the cold air that was not yet warmed from the night.

Nobody was out yet. Nobody was stirring in the hotel — not even the girl in the room next door.

He read his poem through from beginning to end.

He liked the last verse particularly:

“But I have no such lover, and the air
But roughly runs his fingers through my hair;
When late I sit and watch the fire glow
Upon the other chair, I know
No one whom I wish to be sitting there —
Sun, wind, cloud, rain — for me
Make up by day sufficient company;
Only when back to this fine room I go
The want is there, the want is there,
Sitting discreetly in the other chair.”

It wasn't bad. He wasn't sure that it didn't really say something. But it wasn't the success or failure of the poem that was bothering him. He had meant it for Edward. Even as late as last week he had thought of handing it to him as soon as he had got it copied.

While he had been writing it there had been, to be quite truthful, several people whom he had half wanted to see in that empty chair, but all the time, whoever might shove in for a minute here or there, it had been Edward whom he had longed to see in it, Edward whom he had tried to keep out of it.

Not that he minded Edward's intrusion. He knew how to deal with him; he could keep him, on the whole, just where he meant him to be. He could adore Edward, and keep his loneliness virtually intact. He could place his adoration exactly where he had space for it in his scheme of things.

But now, curse it all, he had to struggle with an intruder for whom there was no place anywhere. That girl! He could not keep her out. It wasn't only into the empty chair that she shoved her way: he couldn't even stride through the wind without her striding by his side. He utterly failed to relegate her to her appropriate position. That was what he found so damnable.

He had begun a poem about himself and Edward "striding with forward action step for step" on these hills, but he'd had to chuck it because he couldn't see the hills at all, couldn't see anything but the way that girl's dress blew back against her bare legs, until she looked like the Nike in the Louvre. Even her head and her blown hair fitted the Nike like a glove.

Of course lots of men were in love practically all the time, into it as fast as they were out of it again.

There was probably something in it for them. But there wasn't for him. He was perfectly sure of that. He couldn't place it anywhere in his scheme.

Of course he would forget her as soon as he got away. These obsessions didn't last, however violently they got you at the time. He knew it from his own experience — not of in-loveness, but of friendship — and, besides, he had seen it with other men. It wasn't that that bothered him, it was the cursed way it was wasting all his time just now. He'd meant to get through so much in these weeks away, and he couldn't do a decent piece of work to save his life. He'd tried to blink it until now, but what the devil was the use of humbugging himself? If he couldn't clear his mind, well, then, he couldn't, and he must just stick it until he could get away, when automatically the thing would weaken and gradually disappear out of his consciousness.

Meantime, curse it, he wouldn't feel quite honest in giving those verses to Edward. He wished to God that he was one of those people who could play tricks with themselves. He always saw through himself so confoundedly clearly.

The girl was late this morning. She was generally out by this time with those rotten young bounders. That ought to show you what sort of

taste she had, give you an eye-opener about her if anything could.

He hadn't even heard her knocking about next door. He listened. Not a sound.

He leant out over his window-ledge. God! what a morning!

And then, quite casually, he looked down, and there, on the path beyond the slope of the kitchen roof, she was standing alone.

She stood quite still, her arms dropped, her head lifted to the sun. The kiss of the sun — the kiss of her lover, the sun. That sounded all right — or was it slop? He couldn't tell now. It might be worth remembering — "the kiss of her lover, the sun." But, good Lord! he was afraid it was a different sort of lover that this girl was used to.

And then she went down upon her hands and knees on the path and put her face down into wallflowers; and she looked such a child that he was filled with a funny sort of pity which hurt him so that he could hardly bear it — though, goodness knew, no child on earth could make him feel like that.

And then she got on her feet again and walked away very quietly down the path.

He felt perfectly certain that she was sneaking away like that to avoid those three who pursued her everywhere.

He'd give a good deal to know what she was doing with them here.

He leaned after her, watching her until she turned behind the cypress hedge.

Claire would not go out shopping for the picnic with Laure and Evie because she detested shopping, and because she could not stick Evie and her domestic chatter, and because, having just discovered Diane de Poitiers — or rather just discovered her real affinity with her — she meant to spend the morning in her company.

Diane de Poitiers, Comtesse de Brézé. Ah! And that marvellous “Vous avez froidement sous vos baisers infâmes.”

“Froidement” was so astoundingly right! She felt herself scorched by those icy kisses.

She tried her own name. “Claire de Poitiers, Comtesse de Brézé.” It was all right if you accented the “e” at the end of Claire — Clair-re. It really made the “r” easier to roll. Clair-re.

If any one had ever been born out of due time, it was she.

The odd thing was that most people made a fuss about being born too soon, and for her it was that she was born too late.

She loathed these constraints — these mincing civilities.

“Terni, flétri, souillé, deshonoré, brisé.” She could have stood it all, and given it back again too — fiercely, freely.

She tucked the book under her arm and strode out of the door into the garden. She was off to

the mountains. She couldn't merge herself in that life here in the midst of all this prim futility.

She flung her fierce glance round about her, seeking for an object on which she might fix her scorn, but she found nothing but the wallflowers and the stocks and the spring cabbages.

Laura had got into the habit of going out shopping with Evie in the mornings. Victory wouldn't and Claire wouldn't, and Evie was such a dear, and she was happy dawdling up and down the little streets with her. After all, with the sun blazing down on you, and that whisper of cold in the air from the mountains, it didn't much matter what you did.

Their shopping had gone well that morning, and they were finished so early that Laura suggested looking into the church.

Evie said she would have a look at it too. She was afraid that it was a very dull little church, with nothing to see in it, but perhaps Laura would find something that she hadn't noticed.

Evie was always so touchingly ready to believe that other people would be able to see or know things that she would be too stupid to see or know for herself. It was partly that, Laura thought, that made her such a nice companion, because, after all, it is twice as much fun to show things as to be shown them.

Laura always loved going into a church. Once she was in she might want to get out again, she

might feel bored or fidgeted or suffocated or irritated; but the moment when the heavy swing door squeezed shut behind her was always for her a moment of escape from one world to another. She liked to be alone, so that she might stay quiet long enough to prolong it. But to-day she had to look round for something to show Evie.

The church was certainly very bare.

"The organ's rather nice. Look! sixteen something, isn't it?"

Evie looked faithfully.

Laura crept away up the aisle.

On one side of the chancel arch stood a pink-faced Mary in a blue-and-white dress, and on the other side stood a pink-faced Joseph in a blue-and-white dress, differentiated only by a narrow chocolate trimming. Each of them had a small bunch of dead flowers set in a tumbler on their pedestal, and Joseph certainly had a lighted candle on the stand before him, but Laura felt that they could not possibly be of much account to anybody.

The space above the chancel arch was painted to represent the firmament, and the sun and the moon had human faces.

Evie stared at them with a worried expression. "Laura," she whispered (Evie always whispered in a church), "if that is God in the sun, who can it be in the moon?"

But Laura had spied some figures in the chancel, and escaped again. On either wall a row of

four were set upon stone brackets. Ah, but these were the saints! She stood before Saint Martin. His gold curls were flying. His scarlet cloak flaunted round his head. His blue eye was fierce. His nose was gone. His pink horse reared and pawed the air. It, also, rolled a fierce blue eye. A very small fat beggar in a kilt ran by its fetlocks. And from the rider's raised arm, from his neck, from his boot, hung ends of tape, scraps of rag. Thank-offerings? No, they weren't grand enough. Prayers, intentions. Yes, that was what they were.

She looked along the row of figures. They were all as fine as one another, as gallant, as chivalrous, as debonair.

They might not be the saints that John saw in Patmos — the visionaries and martyrs, crowned with their new names — but they were the saints of the people of France. They were loved and understood and trusted, for they all wore their bits of tape and rag. One seemed to be a favourite. Laura moved across to it. It must be Saint Christopher. His head was gone, but his back was tremendously bowed beneath the weight of such a strange sad-faced child who sat upon it. His staff was almost hidden by the tags and rags, there were so many of them. There was something red amongst them. Laura stirred them reverently with her finger. Ah, how odd! A strip torn from a red linen handkerchief! That couldn't have belonged to one of the village

women. Who could have put it there? Some tourist, perhaps, for fun. People did such oddly vulgar things.

"Aren't they hideous, those figures?" whispered Evie. "And what on earth are those rags? Prayers? Oh, Laura, how dreadful! Fancy praying to things like that!"

And yet if Laura had known the proper formula she felt that she would have said it to them before she left.

"Saint Christopher, carry me with you on my journey." No, one couldn't do it. It had to be the real right thing.

Evie was so anxious that the picnic should be a success, because it had been her own idea to get the old man with the mule-cart. It would save carrying the tea, and it would mean that Victory would go with them. Victory never would walk, but if she had the cart to go in, then really she could have no excuse.

She had been a little worried to notice that the old man had taken a whole day's holiday on the strength of his afternoon's engagement. She did so very much hope that he hadn't been drinking. She had hoped that Laura hadn't noticed him sitting in the café as they passed. He had waved his cap at her in a rather excitable way, but she had pretended not to see him.

Of course these people were just like children, and no doubt he was earning as much in this one

afternoon as he could earn in a whole week, and that had gone to his head.

Anyway, he turned up at the hotel quite punctually, and he had stuck branches of lilac all round his cart and draped it inside with clean sacks, which was really very sweet and pathetic of him.

His speech did certainly sound a little muddled; but that might be Provençal, or it might be his teeth.

The tea was stowed away under the seat. He didn't help much, but he seemed so pleased and happy, and waved his cap and chattered and smiled. He seemed to feel that it was a wonderful outing.

Victory came out, smoking a cigarette. Evie did so wish that she wouldn't smoke everywhere like that. It wasn't that she minded it in itself, but she felt that it might give these poor people who weren't used to it a bad impression of her.

Victory strolled up to the old man. She might have said something to him — told him, at least, that the lilac looked very nice — but she just looked at him as if he didn't exist and turned back to Evie.

"The man's drunk, Mother, and he stinks of garlic."

Evie always felt she would be able to get more into touch with Victory if only she wouldn't speak so quietly. She never sounded as if she were excited or moved or upset in any way. Now

she wasn't in the least cross — she just went straight back into the hotel without another word.

Evie did feel so bitterly disappointed. She had so hoped that Vicky would join in for once.

And the old man, poor old fellow! "You don't think he *is*, do you, Laura?"

Laura was so kind and reassuring. She didn't think he was a bit — at least, anyhow, not to matter.

She asked Edward. It was always as well to have a man's opinion on this sort of thing. Edward thought he was all right too. And he was so nice, saying that he'd come with them, just the same, although Vicky wasn't coming; though he asked if he might catch them up a little later, as he thought he'd walk faster than the mule and he'd like to get his letters done first.

He stayed to watch them start.

Evie got up in front by the old man, and Claire lay on the sacks at the back. Claire seemed to like that position best, and as it was certainly true about the garlic, Evie thought it wise not to insist on her sitting in front, though it did look, to any one who didn't know, as if she had taken the best place.

Laura walked by the side of the cart. She really seemed to want to do this.

Peter had gone on with the children, who were bicycling.

He was so wonderfully responsible for his age, dear Peter!

He always did his utmost to look after those two.

But lately he hadn't seemed quite as jolly as usual, not as full of spirits, not as ready to enjoy everything. Perhaps he needed a dose. You never knew, even with great boys of that age, whether they really looked after themselves properly. She would ask him this evening.

The sun was baking. The poor lilac branches began to look very faded. She did wish she had some water to give them.

If only the old man had thought of a little row of jam-jars.

She was afraid that Laura swallowed an awful lot of dust, but she didn't seem to mind. Laura was so nice about things like that.

She tried her best to keep them amused, and the old man was really very delightful in spite of his smell.

"Do you know what he calls his mule, Laura?"

Laura drew up alongside.

"He calls it 'Bibette,' because it is the first noise that the baby lambs make in the spring (brebis are lambs, and not kids, aren't they?), and he says it is his own little lamb. Isn't that rather sweet?"

The old man evidently heard the name and bleated to show them. "Bi-i-i-bé-é-é." It wasn't much like anything, but it was so touching. But at that moment a bicycle came past them and the little lamb shied nearly into the ditch.

"Brute!" called Claire from the back. And when Evie had found her seat again on the plank, she was jolly glad that it was she who was sitting there and not Laura, who would be sure to forget to hold on.

Conversation wasn't very easy against the rumble and bump of the cart, and she had a feeling that Claire was uncomfortable and cross. She kept on heaving herself about on the sacks and muttering to Laura at the tail of the cart.

"Evie"—Laura drew up level with her—"does that awful little terrier belong to us? Does he belong to our old man, I mean?"

Evie herself had been bothered for some time by the vile little animal which returned every few moments from scouring the gutters to snap at Bibette's heels. She felt sure that it would get kicked before it was done. She had a complicated conversation with the old man. He did smell extraordinarily strongly.

"No," she shouted to Laura. "He says it isn't."

And then — oh, stupid old man! — "Yes, it is. It's his brother's. He says it always follows Bibette. Fancy letting it! It's bound to get kicked or run over sooner or later."

Mercifully the little brute had another idea for the moment, and was running ahead down the middle of the road. It ran in a vulgar way, sideways, and with one hind leg tucked up.

And then, before there was time to call it or

try to get it, a car was rushing along towards them, and the old man was bearing with all his strength to lug Bibette to the right-hand ditch.

The car tooted at them on a silly high note like a toy, a cloud of dust overwhelmed them, Bibette shied, the cart rocked, and when they emerged at the other side of suffocation the dog was screaming and wriggling in a little dust storm of its own in the middle of the road.

Laura shut her eyes tight and stood stock still.

She clenched her hands and hoped she wouldn't be sick.

When she opened her eyes Evie was out of the cart and stooping over the dog. In a moment she had it in her arms and had carried it to the ditch, and was kneeling there and splashing water over its head.

Claire was standing up in the cart swearing at the top of her voice. "The brutes! The brutes! The devils!"

The old man was standing in the road, obviously lost in his bewilderment.

Two men arrived from nowhere and stood by Evie. They were hugely amused. One of them declared loudly, for their benefit, that if it were a man lying there he should leave him to it.

"Faut mourir, que voulez-vous?" He felt his statement to be heroic.

Only Evie worked away at the wriggling, blood-stained body.

And then Edward strode quickly past them —

past Laura, who stood there useless and sick, past Claire, shouting in the cart, and pushed aside the grinning men and was down on his knees at Evie's side.

Laura felt more disgusted and ashamed of herself than she did before. But she couldn't, she simply couldn't, go forward to help them. She couldn't see that dog suffer its last agony.

Claire had transferred her fury from the car to the two men who were watching Edward and Laura.

"Swine, these Frenchmen! Look at them laughing! Swine! Beasts!"

Laura couldn't stand it any longer.

"Do be quiet, Claire! It isn't a bit of use rowing at them."

And then, suddenly, the mangled body came alive again, jumped from Evie's arms, stood up on wide-spread legs, and actually shook itself!

The audience, now that the show was over, prepared to move off. The old man returned to the cart. He was plainly thinking that now at last those mad foreigners would leave the beast alone and get on with the splendid affair of the picnic with Bibette. He set up a lilac branch that had slipped sideways.

But Evie thought differently.

Laura had gone to her on her still shaking legs.

"Oh, Evie"—she couldn't help saying it—"how marvellously brave you are!"

"No, I'm not." Evie hadn't time for her

praise. "Look here, Edward, either I must go home with the dog, or you must explain to the old man that he has got to take it straight back in the cart and wash its head in clean water. Mind you make him understand clean."

The old man was argumentative, but he had to give in in the end. He had to, because, as he explained to them, it was they who were paying, and so, when one came to consider it, one had to admit that it was, after all, their affair. But it was clear how much he minded.

Claire got out the cart, and Laura helped Edward to unload the picnic baskets.

The old man mounted the seat and sat there looking hunched and unhappy.

Evie tucked the dog in among the sacks at the back. It was shaking all over, and kept shutting its eyes in a way that was heart-rending to see.

Evie had a lot of parting directions to give to the old man, and then, at last, Bibette was hauled round, and the cart rumbled off with a cloud of dust at its tail, leaving the four of them and the baskets on the white road.

It was a horrid picnic. They were all hot and tired by the time they had lugged the baskets to the place where they were to meet Peter and the children. The rocks they tried to sit on were made up of small sharp ends, and there wasn't a scrap of shade anywhere. Claire was sulky, Evie was tired, Edward was silent, and Laura was ashamed of herself. Goodness, how ashamed

of herself she was! She knew that she would have stood there and done nothing if it had been a child who had been run over, instead of a dog. She looked at Edward every now and again to see if he was as disgusted with her as she was with herself.

It seemed years before Bibette and the cart appeared on the stony track that led up from the road.

Evie was off directly she spied them to question the old man about the dog, while they followed with the baskets.

She came back to meet them, red in the face, and spluttering with indignation.

"Laura! Edward! What do you think he has done? Let the dog jump out of the cart on his way back! He hasn't done a thing for it! He doesn't even know where it is! *Oh*, these foreigners! I know I ought to have gone back with it myself. It was just pure slackness on my part."

Evie always blamed herself for anything that went wrong.

They stacked the tea-baskets in the cart, and walked in a procession behind it. No one wanted to go in it.

The old man was horribly disappointed. He hunched his shoulders. Every little while he pulled a bottle out of his pocket and took a swig from it in the vain effort to cheer himself.

The dying lilac branches, hanging their heavy heads round the sides of the cart, added to the

melancholy of their appearance. Laura felt as if she were walking in a funeral procession.

They had settled as they walked along in the dust that after they had left the baskets at the hotel Evie should go back with the old man and the cart and try to find the dog. But when they got to the door Victory came out and called Evie away.

Evie came back looking distracted. "Laura, what shall I do? Some friends of Victory's, the Jackmans (do you know them? I don't care for them very much, between you and me; very clever sort of people — really a bit beyond me, but very nice for Vicky, of course) have turned up here for the night, and Vicky wants me to be civil to them and get them to dine with us; and you know Vicky never asks me to do anything for her, and so I feel I mustn't put her off, whatever happens; and yet that poor animal — I can't bear to fail it — I have a feeling that old man might leave it to stray about all night in its suffering."

"But I'll go, Evie. Of course I'll go."

Laura did so hope that her voice sounded better than she felt. Inside her she was quaking. She hated the business.

She was terrified of finding the dog in an awful state, and, to be quite honest with herself, she was frightened of the old man. His talk frightened her because she found his mixture of Provençal and French so terribly difficult to understand, and she had a frightened feeling that, whether

or no he had been drunk to start with, he was no soberer since he'd had all those goes at his bottle.

If only Claire hadn't gone upstairs so quickly, she would have come with her. But she hadn't the face to go up and fetch her.

She set herself, as manfully as she could, to walk beside the cart. The old man tried to persuade her to get up by his side amongst the dead lilac. He looked so dejected when she refused that she felt a selfish brute.

Off they rumbled over the cobbles.

Edward wouldn't come, of course. He'd seen enough of her to think that she'd better be left to cope with things for herself for once.

And then there he was by her side. "Going without me, Laura?" He laughed at her.

Ah, now she felt quite different! He didn't talk to her. He walked level with the old man and talked to him, and Laura held on to the tail-board of the cart, but she felt safe and happy.

The old man's ten minutes stretched into a good twenty before they bumped over a narrow bridge across a smelly ditch and pulled up at a dilapidated hut.

The old man climbed down and began to take Bibette out of the cart.

There was no sign of the dog. "Le chien?" ventured Laura, but the old man was talking to his Bibette, rubbing his cheek on the mule's nose.

Laura told Edward the story of Bibette's name.

"I don't know about being his little lamb," said Edward, "but it is his living. He's pretty well at rock bottom, poor old fellow."

The old man had finished with Bibette. He opened the door of the shed and beckoned to them to follow him, with evident pride.

The shed was pitch dark. The floor was of mud, and it was littered with rubbish, over which the great brute of a mule picked its way as delicately as a cat.

"Vous voyez comme il est bien logis!" The old man was so sure of their admiration!

Laura got out as quickly as she could.

"Et maintenant ——" she began again. "Oh, Edward, do make him show us the dog!"

But the old man had something else to show. He flung open the door of his hut. It was another shed with an earth floor, dark like Bibette's, but, unlike Bibette's, there seemed to be nothing in it but a heap of clothes in one corner and a pail of dirty water in the middle.

"Entrez, Monsieur — Dame!" He waved them in with the air of a prince doing the courtesies of his palace.

But Laura shook her head violently. "Nous sommes très en retard — très, très pressés," and she showed him her watch.

The old man looked at her sadly. But then he brightened.

He pulled the bottle out of his pocket. He held it up to the sky. There was a good drop

left. He held the bottle out to Laura. "Buvez, Mademoiselle! C'est bon, ce vin là!"

Laura sweated with horror. "Oh, Edward, help me! I *can't*! I absolutely can't!"

Edward was splendid. He took a swig out of the bottle himself, and then he explained that never, never in any circumstances did Mademoiselle touch wine — it was a vow.

And yet Laura was miserably certain that the old man saw through them. He looked so forlorn.

There was nothing more to offer them or to show them, so that he was willing now to give his attention to the dog.

It was not to be seen anywhere, but whistlings and callings produced it at last from behind a heap of old tins. The blood had dried on its face and head. It looked deplorable, but it was walking all right.

It was hopeless trying to explain to the old man what he ought to do for it. How could he do anything when there was nothing to do it with? The only solution was to take the dog back with them. Edward said, as he tied a bit of string on to its collar, that he had known all along that that was what it would come to.

The old man went with them to the bridge over the ditch.

At one side of it, on the edge of his domain, grew a lilac bush. It had been stripped nearly bare — for the cart, Laura supposed. White ribbons of peeled bark curled from the ends of

the broken branches. But in the centre, on the main stem, there was still one heavy purple cluster — the king bloom — the very heart and head of the bush. It was such an essential part of its growth, it was so much the bush itself, that Laura would never have dreamt of picking it for any one if it had been her own, but the old man took it and broke it and gave it to her. It was all he had left. She nearly cried. It was the last straw to her misery.

Oh, she was miserable! She could hardly bear to look back and see him standing there by his broken bush, hunched and forlorn, knowing quite well that she had been too fine to drink his wine — his very best wine grown from his own vine.

He and Bibette had offered all they had, and it had been no use.

"Edward, I am the filthiest coward. They say that we all have to eat a peck of dust before we die; I ought to have to eat a hundredweight!"

She did so hope that he would comfort her, make her feel better about herself, but he only smiled at her and said, "You couldn't help it, could you, Laura?"

And yet she was glad that he didn't condone her cowardice.

"Claire would have drunk it, and Evie would have drunk it."

"Yes, Evie would have drunk it."

But he smiled at her again very kindly.

And then Quiqui, the dog, who had been

trotting along quite happily at the end of his string and hadn't shown the least reluctance at leaving his home with them, suddenly decided that he would go no further. He sat down. Edward pulled. Quiqui slid along the ground in a sitting position.

Edward tried to jerk him to his feet. The collar jerked up against his wounded head. He yelled, but he still sat.

"Drat the animal! I shall have to carry him, I suppose," said Edward.

He stooped to pick him up, and Quiqui bit his thumb.

Edward shook the blood away and sucked the bite.

Laura looked at him.

"It's nothing," he said, and stooped again.

But Laura was before him. She meant to have the dog herself. But Quiqui was thoroughly frightened now, and as she grabbed at him quickly to be before Edward, he fastened his teeth on her finger.

"You ass!" said Edward. He looked really cross. "Show it to me!"

Laura laughed. The bite had cheered her. "It's nothing," she said, "any more than yours."

"Suck it," he commanded.

Laura sucked it.

Quiqui had forgotten them. He was passionately absorbed in a flea which he had just become aware of at the base of his tail.

"I'm going to have him."

"No, you're not!" Edward was adamant. He shouldered her away, and very gently, while Quiqui was still concentrated on his flea, he picked him up. Quiqui settled down in his arms as if he had never been anywhere else.

They were horribly late for dinner. As they pushed open the glass door everybody in the whole hotel seemed to them to be waiting ready dressed in the hall.

Evie was there with Claire and Peter and the children and Victory and a strange man and woman.

Evie was talking to the strange woman. As they came in she cast a distracted look at the dog and at Laura.

"Don't wait for us," they called to her dumbly with their lips.

Evie nodded her head a great many times, to mean all sorts of things, and went back to her conversation.

Laura felt that she and Edward were like two children in disgrace, as they sneaked up the stairs side by side.

"Where on earth shall I take him?"

"In my room." There was nowhere else. She opened the door for him.

"On your bed?"

"Must, I'm afraid."

"He'll be full of fleas!"

"Oh, dear! But we can't help it. There isn't a chair."

Edward laid him down on the bed. Laura tucked the duvet round his back. Poor little misery! He had one most engaging pink-rimmed eye. The other had a black spot over it and was quite ordinary.

Edward was looking round her room. There was nothing to see in it except the pile of books by her bed and the photograph of Lellie when she was twelve.

"Got any plaster for your finger?"

Laura shook her head.

"I'll bring you some, then. Evie gave me a reel."

She was in her petticoat when he came back with it. She took it from him through the crack of the door. He laughed. Did he think her a funny old prude for not letting him in?

"How long shall you be?"

"Four minutes!"

"Right! I'll race you!"

They both reached the stairs together, out of breath and laughing.

They were all in at dinner, and Evie had left Edward a place next to Mrs. Jackman. Laura thanked her stars that she was between Peter and Evie. She could never have collected herself sufficiently for intelligent conversation. Besides, she was bothered by the unhappy conviction that she had put her dress on back to front. Surely it had never been so high in the neck before? She tried to think that it had, but there was an

ominous draught at her back, and it was very constricted across her chest. She dared not put up her hand to feel. She tried hard to remember if there was any sort of trimming on the front which would look particularly odd if worn at the back.

She looked round to see if any one had noticed that she looked funny. Edward was laughing at her from the other side of the table. He wagged his plastered thumb at her. She wagged back with her plastered finger. What fun it was to have him for her friend like that!

The Jackmans were interesting to look at. Victory's friends were never just the same as everybody else. Not that George Jackman was so very different. His side-whiskers (did one call those short eyebrows down his cheeks "whiskers"?), and his very fat black tie, with its waist in a tie ring, were the only things that she could fix on as un-ordinary.

Mrs. Jackman was more exciting. She was an intriguing mixture of sixteen and sixty. She was dressed in a little black silk dress covered with odd little white frills — the dress of a bygone sixteen. Her face was powdered white, and her lips were painted scarlet. Her eyebrows had been reduced to so fine a line that they were almost invisible across the table.

She had dark lines under her eyes. Her face might easily be sixty. But her forehead was lovely — high, innocent, and pure — and her hair

was dragged straight back into a comb like Alice in Wonderland's. It fell forward again in a curl tucked behind each ear — a child's fat dark curl — but it shone in the bright light with an untruthful pinkish glint.

The conversation as carried on by Mrs. Jackman and Peter and Victory and Edward seemed to be dreadfully intelligent.

The children were quiet, and Evie was obviously at sea.

Her dear kind eyes roved over Mr. Jackman with a look of bewilderment.

"I didn't know you cared about pictures," Mr. Jackman was saying to her. "Of course I found in London, as I did in Paris, that there was simply nothing that one could look at but the *surréalistes*. Didn't you find that yourself, Mrs. Vereker?"

He put on his horn-rimmed spectacles to watch for her reply with the most beautiful air of expectation.

Evie looked desperate.

"Yes. Oh, yes, of course. But"—with a plunge into her native truthfulness—"I am ashamed to confess that I missed this year's Academy."

Mr. Jackman took off his spectacles and folded them up, sadly, by the side of his plate.

His wife was faring better.

"Callista"—Victory leaned across Edward to speak to her—"look at that girl at the corner

table with the three youths, and tell us what she is like."

Mrs. Jackman looked.

"Sheer Matisse," she pronounced at last, and her statement raised such a storm of argument from her neighbours that they warmed up in no time, and it was a most successful meal for that end of the table.

When Laura came down again after taking Quiqui his supper, they were all settled in the hall.

She had decided, after consideration, on changing her dress round again. She did not think that any one would have noticed her at dinner, and it did undoubtedly look better the right way on.

She wished that their party did not take up so much of the hall. They made an enormous circle under the glare of the central lights. The other people in the hotel seemed to be crowded by them into the outer corners. The two old ladies were reading their portions of the "Morning Post" behind the coat-stand, where the light was so bad that she felt sure that it would be murder to their eyes.

Only the girl had come off all right as usual. She was playing dominoes with the fair young man at the little table over by the caisse at the other end of the hall. Madame was leaning over her shoulder sharing the fun of the game.

Edward pushed out an empty chair by his side for Laura to sit on. "We're going to play a game," he said.

"The 'What would he be?' game," said Evie, with extreme brightness. She was evidently determined to make a success of the evening.

Laura shook her head hopelessly. She didn't know the game, and she would be so bad at it, anyhow.

"You know, Cousin Laura"—Bun was a kind child—"you say, What would she be if she was an earwig? and then you guess Miss Forster."

"Frightful lucid!" Victory jeered at her. "If Laura doesn't know it, why don't we play a trial round? Choose some one in the room and describe them without any one going out."

Everybody agreed to that.

"Who shall we take?" asked Mrs. Jackman. "It must be some one we can see, because George and I don't know any one here."

"Let's try the girl over there by the caisse," suggested Evie.

"Your Matisse." Peter glared at Mrs. Jackman. How shy he really was!

Mrs. Jackman rolled her tired eyes over to the girl, and considered her for a moment.

The girl was laughing, with her head in the air. Oreste had paused with his tray of coffee to share in the joke.

She had her arm round Madame's waist. Madame gave her a little smack on her back. It was plain that she had said something outrageous, and they were all revelling in it.

Mrs. Jackman trailed her eyes back again.

"Yes, she will do. You begin, Victory."

Victory sucked at her cigarette for a moment and then she turned to Mr. Jackman.

"George, if she were a novel of this century, who would have written her?"

George Jackman looked fixedly at the girl, and then, very seriously, "Lawrence — D. H., of course," he pronounced.

"I disagree with you," said Peter.

"That doesn't matter, Peter"—Victory was crushing. "You'll have your turn in a minute."

"Everybody ought to ask the person sitting on their right," explained Evie.

Peter blushed. He was shy of these Jackmans! Perhaps he wanted to make an impression on Callista.

George Jackman turned to Evie. He took off his horn spectacles before he questioned her this time.

He thought very carefully. Laura felt sure that he was searching for something which he considered well within Evie's compass.

"Mrs. Vereker, if she were a flower, what flower would she be?"

Evie looked tremendously relieved. She screwed up her kind eyes and thought hard. She opened them again and stared across at the girl. Nothing seemed to come. George Jackman was looking more and more patient every second.

Victory was beginning to fidget.

"A rose," she brought out at last, but she looked apprehensively at Victory. And then, trying to make it sound a little better, "A red rose!"

"Oh, no-o-o!" There was a groan nearly round the circle.

"A tiger-lily, perhaps," suggested George Jackman.

"I know," said Bun. "A yellow iris, like the one we found all by itself up on the top."

"Scarcely so esoteric! Nothing very rare or solitary, I think," and Mrs. Jackman raised her almost invisible eyebrows and smiled round at them.

"I don't agree with you about the solitary." Peter was extraordinarily self-assertive this evening!

Mrs. Jackman merely smiled at him again. "Nn?" She made a little sound of tolerant disagreement, and blinked her eyelashes at him.

The game didn't seem to be going well at all. Evie plunged in to its rescue.

"If she were music — and let any one answer, don't you think?"

"Brahms!" said Peter.

"Brahms, of course," said Claire.

"Don't know Brahms," said Bun.

"I believe, all the same, it would be Chopin," said Edward.

"Nn? Chopin? As bad as that?" murmured Callista Jackman.

"Brahms, I should think," George Jackman reassured them.

"Callista, can't you see that it would be just Brahms?"

"Nn?" Callista Jackman looked as if Brahms were a beetle that they had inconsequently produced from nowhere.

"A — a ——" Evie's kind eyes roved desperately over the group.

"A statue?" she plunged.

"You mean who would have sculpted her?" George Jackman was unendingly patient.

"Yes, who would have sculpted her? Any one to answer!"

There was an interminable pause.

"Are there any sculptors," murmured Mrs. Jackman, "except Maillol?"

"Heaps!" said Peter aggressively. "Hundreds!"

"But one can't look at them, can one?" Mrs. Jackman was as sweet as ever. "Zadkine?" She was trying her best for him — "I forgot that there was Zadkine."

Mr. Jackman was thinking deeply.

"There might be some one baroque," he pondered.

"I tell you what," said Evie. "Laura must understand the game by now. It is such a good game, isn't it, Laura? Why not play it properly and some one go out? Why not Laura go out?"

"Yes," agreed Edward. "Laura can go out."

"Out you go, Cousin Laura," said Billy.

"You can go out by holding your ears," said the kind Bun. "If you think you're on the verge of hearing something, hum a tune!"

So Laura held her ears and gazed up at the electric chandelier over their heads.

"Come in." Edward tapped her knee.

"Where do I begin?"

"Begin on your right, with Edward," Evie encouraged her.

"If he were music"—Laura thought that she had better stick to the questions she had heard asked before—"who would have composed him?"

"Debussy." Edward was quite settled.

"Annie Laurie," muttered Bun, under her breath.

"If he were poetry?" Poetry was a good idea.

"De la Mare, I'm afraid," said Victory.

"Nonsense!" said Peter. "He couldn't possibly be any one but Christina Rossetti!"

"Skelton!" said Edward.

"Verlaine!" said Claire.

"I can't take them all." Laura was laughing. "For goodness sake some one tell me which!"

"Mix de la Mare and Christina, and you'll be fairly right," said Peter.

"Then I shall pass you, Peter. You've had Christina. Mrs. Jackman"—oh, she'd better ask Mrs. Jackman something about art—"who would have painted him?"

"Nn?" Mrs. Jackman considered the question while her tired eyes wandered over her. "Whistler," she breathed at last — she sounded sorry about it. "She's sheer Whistler."

"She?" That was a help!

"Billy, if he were something to drink?"

"Barley water." Billy had no hesitation.

Everybody laughed.

"Barley water and Christina Rossetti and de la Mare! What a feeble creature! Oh, Whistler — nice, but it mightn't do much to ginger him up! And Debussy — Debussy makes him more interesting. . . . Bun, if he were an animal?"

"Well" — Bun had an air of being very careful — "he'd be a domestic one, not a wild one, and small — not the least a cow or anything of that sort. Not a cat. He'll have to be a dog, I suppose, because he wouldn't be a canary or a goldfish. Not a big dog, nor a terrier — a Pekinese, perhaps ——"

"Oh, Bun, how can you? Such horrid little beasts! And not in the least like!" Evie was protecting some one.

"A deer, Bun? What about a roe deer? That's what I'd put him at." Edward was supporting Evie.

"No, thank you. I'll stick to Pekinese. I really did know a nice one once."

"Claire, a flower?" She wouldn't ask Evie for a flower, in case Evie thought that they thought that she wouldn't know about anything else.

"White lilac, I think. Don't you think white lilac?" And Claire smiled across at Edward.

"A white fritillary," he answered.

A white fritillary! Who did he think of like that, as delicate and rare? Victory? But you couldn't call Victory barley water! The barley water was only Billy's contribution, but she wasn't a fritillary. She was something exotic — gardenia, tuberoses. . . . And Christina Rossetti, that was out of the question. But Edward had said Skelton. She couldn't remember much about Skelton — the pretty primrose — but that wasn't Victory. . . .

"Evie, if he were a garment — something to wear?"

Evie gazed at her for a moment, and then she averted her eyes. She stared round the hall. She dwelt on the coat-stand.

"Oh, I know!" said Bun, jumping up and down on her chair. "Oh, I do know so well!"

"Be quiet, Bun! A garment? Yes, now, a garment. . . . Oh, I know! One of those pretty embroidered Chinese shawls!"

"Oh, no, Ma! Not a bit! Do let me say now! I know exactly! A white muslin dress with all the starch washed out!"

"Oh, Bun! How can you? I call it so rude to Cousin Laura!"

Cousin Laura! But — "Oh, goodness! You don't mean to say that you took me?" She felt the silly red creeping up her neck and face.

"Yes, we did, Laura dear. But, you know, Bun was just *silly*! You didn't mind, did you?"

"Mind?" Laura was laughing. "But Bun's was the best of the lot! I really think I might almost have guessed myself from that dress, if I'd had time to think."

Oh, but she did wish she had a minute to think! A white fritillary. A deer. She felt silly and excited.

She leant out of her window over the moonlit garden. A white fritillary. Well, what? Precious, perhaps. . . . Rather weak . . . wangly . . . ? But he'd said it as if he liked it. . . . A deer. . . . That was nonsense, of course. That girl — you could call her a deer — even gazelle wouldn't sound too ornamental if you thought of her. . . . No, she was probably far more like Bun's beastly little Pekinese! But the fritillary . . .

Oh, Lord! what a fool she was! And at her age!

Pleased as a schoolgirl!

Yes, but why not be pleased at the real thing, the real fact that Edward did honestly like her?

You couldn't possibly say that it was silly or sentimental to like having him for a friend.

It might make a very pleasant difference to her life. He'd come and see her when they got back. They'd talk. . . .

There was nothing silly about that. . . .

Her room was full of the heavy scent of the

lilac that the old man had given her. She bent her face down to the cool flower.

Quiqui was passionately absorbed in sleeping.

She leaned over him on her bed.

She stroked the tight white bun very gently.

He growled ferociously without uncurling so much as an eyelash.

She laughed. "Quiqui, *darling*," she whispered to him.

CHAPTER V

TINK, tink, tink. . . .

The church bell was calling in its quick tin voice, while Laura was spreading the delicious thick honey on her last piece of bread.

Claire had finished ages ago. There was no one about. Laura was late.

The children had taken Quiqui for a walk. He had started out like a little angel, but goodness knew what he was by this time!

The sun was delicious. She stretched her face up to its warmth.

The Lefebvre family came along the garden path. They were evidently going to Mass. The father wore a bowler on his hair, and his fat chest was tightly encased in a black coat. He was buttoning a tight glove of fiery orange leather. Laura had seen just such gloves in a shop window in Avignon, labelled "Style Anglais. Pour le Sport."

His fat wife waddled by his side. His fat daughter waddled behind.

How unwholesome she looked, poor creature! Her greasy yellow face was nearly the same colour as her mustard tartan coat.

What funny little steps they all walked with!

The two old earwigs came out from the *salle-à-manger*.

They were complete with their hats and jackets and feather boas, and each carried a black book. Surely to goodness they weren't going to Mass? The thought upset all Laura's convictions about them. Ah, no! What a relief! They each picked up an iron chair as they passed (how they had to hitch their frail shoulders and lean sideways to lift the weight!) and carried it with them down the path and on to the plot of rough grass under the olive tree. They were going to read their church services in the shade. That was just as it should be.

Laura finished the dregs of her coffee.

She was extraordinarily happy. She had a feeling that very soon Edward would come along the path or out from the house, and that he would sit down by her side, or that they would stroll off together.

She would hear him say to her, "Laura, I was looking for you."

Or perhaps he would say again, "Little Laura. . . . Good morning, little Laura. . . ."

But it was Evie's voice that called her eyes up to the window. Evie was leaning out. She had on her hat — her Sunday hat — and her Sunday dress.

"Laura, I thought I would go to church. Will you come with me? Or would you mind it being Roman Catholic? I wouldn't in England — I mean, of course, I'd go to the proper church; but when I'm abroad, it always seems to me, don't

you think so? I mean, after all, it is church, isn't it?"

"Of course I'll come, Evie."

It wouldn't be quite as pleasant as sitting waiting for Edward, and yet perhaps it would be pleasanter. It would make his friendship — the fact that he would certainly seek her companionship, that she had no need of opportunities — seem more sure.

"Where have you been, Laura? Where have you been, little Laura?" "To church with Evie..." And they would smile at each other....

"Bring me my hat, Evie — it's on my bed; and gloves if I ought to have them."

All the village was going to Mass. The women hurried along in ones and twos, their black shawls pulled over their heads, their black skirts swinging over the cobbles, intent upon getting there. Richer and poorer looked all alike.

The men went separately, slouching along in groups, smoking and talking, with an air of going there by chance.

Stalls were set up at the side of the church, for the sale of fritures and sweets — sugar sticks, and magnificent great striped bulls'-eyes — for the country people to take home with them. Laura could hardly tear Evie away from them.

The church was half full. The black backs of the women looked all like the same black back. They sat or knelt in the pews. The men lounged at the back on either side of the doors.

An old priest came in. He walked down the aisle, flicking his brush at the faithful.

"Nnn-A-a-sper-ges!" yelled the three little boys from the chancel, and the organ brayed suddenly on a wild strange note.

The Mass wandered along a vague and shapeless course.

The women seemed to stand or kneel or sit as they felt inclined. Evie's face grew quite strained and anxious as she tried with conscientious persistence to do as the majority did.

There were moments when she was no sooner down on her knees than she was up again, moments when she had got to her feet and nearly everybody else had suddenly decided to kneel.

Laura gave up any attempt to conform. She knelt as long as she wanted to kneel, her face covered with her hands, vague and happy, thinking a little about God, and talking a good deal to Edward.

"...Hullo, Edward!" (she was in her little flat)... "But I'll get tea in a minute — you can't think how domestic I am... Evie always did it all, didn't she?... Look, here's a book while the kettle boils..." (what should the book be? Never mind — something new). "Yes, it is warm in here... we can have a good talk... Tell me all about..." (or should it be a lovely evening?) "Come to Hampton Court on the top of a 'bus? And walk back?"

"Not too far for you, little Laura? . . ."

At last the old priest was in the pulpit, and Evie sat down with a sigh of relief. She had to get up again unexpectedly for the space of a few words, but then she was down again with a prospect of being reasonably settled for some time to come. Laura could see that she meant to have a good rest.

The sermon seemed to be about the Virgin, an unpromising subject so far as Laura's sympathies were concerned. But the old priest was charming. He began nearly every sentence with "Et alors, mes chères frères," and each time he said, "Mes chères frères," he smiled kindly at the old women beneath him.

"Et alors, mes chères frères, soyez petits comme elle."

Laura liked that.

"Soyez humbles comme elle. . . . Soyez silencieux, soyez écouteux, afin que le Saint Esprit puisse vous faire entendre sa voix. . . ."

"Soyez toujours bien petits . . ."

"Cre-e-do in unum De-e-o!" yelled the little boys, and the organ brayed more fearfully than before.

Evie looked hot and tired after her exertions.

"I do feel ready for my déjeuner, don't you, Laura? Don't you think we might have it very sharp at twelve?"

They wandered through the hotel into the garden to see if any of the others were about.

A bang — not a very loud one, it is true — made them both start.

“What was that, Laura? An air-gun? Oh dear! Billy couldn’t have got — Peter would never have let him ——”

Evie hurried between the tables.

But it wasn’t Billy. It was the girl — *the* girl.

She was standing on the grass plot with her three young men and Oreste and Marcel.

A piece of paper with a rough bull’s eye marked on it was fixed to the apple tree in front of the shed.

Madame stood on the path to watch. As they joined her the girl raised her arm high, dropped it, with a flourish of the wrist, to the level of the target, and snapped off the pistol.

Marcel ran forward to the target. “Boule!” he yelled, waving his arms with joy, “boule!”

“Bull!” shouted the young men.

Madame clapped her hands. “Bravo, Mam’selle Coucou! Bravo! bravo!” She was almost as pleased as Marcel.

She was a little apologetic for her enthusiasm when she found them standing by her side.

“Madame!” she bowed to Evie. “Madoiselle!” she bowed to Laura.

“Justement je regardais Mam’selle Coucou. Elle sait tirer très bien, celui-la! She shoot nice. But I pass de time. I mus’ go ’ome. I see ’er play because dey mus’ all go après demain.”

"Go *to-morrow*? Vous dites qu'ils sont de départ demain?"

Evie sounded as if she were quite distressed.

"All going to-morrow, Madame?" asked Laura. Madame liked to speak her English.

"De dree young mens go — pas demain — Shoosday — but Mam'selle Coucou she attends anozer — on dit que c'est son frère, mais on ne sait jamais — qui arrive en automobile — an 'e take 'er to Marseilles, an' all go en partie en Corse. . . . Dat is why dey shoots — pour les brigands, vous savez," and Madame laughed at them.

"And is this the end of them? Aren't they coming back again?"

"*Surely*," insisted Evie, "ils vont retourner?"

It seemed that neither Laura nor Evie could bear to let them go.

Madame shrugged her shoulders. "C'est bien possible. Ils disent qu'ils vont revenir. . . . Mais ——" She spread her hands. She didn't seem to care one way or the other. Laura felt very disappointed with her.

The luncheon bell rang, and from different directions they all collected round their table. Edward came with Victory.

He looked across the table at Laura and smiled.

"Been out?"

"Church," answered Laura.

"It was very nice," said Evie, sitting down wearily in her chair. "Who'll have olives?"

Really these Roman Catholic churches *are* very nice. There's something so quaint"—she suppressed a yawn. "But I do want my déjeuner—I can't think why church makes one so hungry. . . . Oh, but I've a piece of news for you!" She nodded across at the corner table. "They're going the day after to-morrow!"

"Going!"

Wasn't it funny the way they all seemed to feel that the girl and her men were part of the hotel? Why, Peter sounded positively agonised at the thought of their departure!

Evie laughed. "I'm glad you feel like that about them, Peter. I really couldn't believe it when Madame told me just now. She seemed so fond of the girl, didn't she? But I'm afraid she's awfully French—here to-day, you know, and gone to-morrow."

"When are they going?" Even Victory seemed to be interested.

"Tuesday. I suppose if they are going to Marseilles they'll go with Berthon when he fetches the post from Tarascon some time about cockcrow. But the girl is motoring. Her brother or some one—didn't Madame say it was, Laura?—is fetching her in his car. They're going to Corsica."

"Well, we shall have to stare harder than ever for the next day and a bit." Edward had always been rather amused at their interest in the girl.

"Corsica?" said Claire. "Mm. Yes. She would go to Corsica."

"Why would she?" Peter turned to her so suddenly that he knocked over the glass of wine by the side of his plate.

The red flood crept across the table-cloth. Peter was nearly as red. How boys of that age did mind being clumsy!

"Because she is a wild being, and Corsica is a wild country."

"Yes. Oh, I see!" Peter looked appreciatively at Claire.

"Even this"—he glanced round scornfully at the two old earwigs and fat Monsieur Poulenc sucking up his soup—"is really beastly tame."

Claire and Peter talked together for the rest of the meal.

Evie decided that if it didn't make any difference to any one she would not go to the bull-fight that afternoon.

She admitted that she had a headache. She thought perhaps the church had been rather stuffy, though she had enjoyed it.

She argued fiercely when Laura told her that she would not go either. She was terrified that Laura was staying behind to be with her. Laura explained over and over again that she wasn't a bit sure that she would like the bull-fight. She knew that they didn't kill the bull, but it was perfectly possible, as Billy said, that the bull might kill one of the men, which she would mind

just as much. And if she didn't come they could all pack into Berthon's car, and if she did come Berthon would have to engage that dull friend of his with the china teeth, and without any brakes to his car.

And, besides, there was Quiqui.

And besides Quiqui, she had a feeling that she didn't want to go with them all. She wanted to be very quiet and to explore her happiness by herself. And when they came back Edward would take her for a walk.

So she smiled and insisted, and at last they gave in.

"We shall be back by tea-time," Edward said to her.

"We'll go for a walk after tea," was what she felt that he said.

Evie went to lie down.

Laura went to fetch Quiqui from her room.

She meant to do very little — to keep herself for her walk with Edward in the evening.

She strolled up the road to the monuments and sat herself on her block of stone.

Marius and Cæsar clasped each other under the canopy of the tower. The sun gilded the outline of a robe — the robe of Cæsar or of Marius. What years ago it seemed since the evening when she had first talked to Edward here!

How uncomfortable she had felt that evening at what had seemed to her to be the sudden intimacy of their conversation!

How ashamed of herself she had been for being so unlike herself! And now it wasn't a bit unlike herself to say anything to him. She could talk to him almost as she talked to herself.

Quiqui crept up into her lap. He nuzzled his nose into the hollow of her neck under her chin. He kissed her with delicate butterfly kisses of his whiskers. His bulging eyes shone with love, he was gentle beyond any conception of gentleness. Then, suddenly, he sprang to the ground, stood for a second strung like wire, and then span round in a circle after his own tail. But his tail was just too short. His nose missed it by an inch or more. He gave up the chase as suddenly as he had begun it, and went to sleep on his legs.

The others were extraordinarily late back.

Evie decided at last not to wait for them any longer, but to broach a thermos for herself and Laura.

They sat at one of the iron tables in the garden and sipped their tea out of folding tin cups.

Evie was tired and unusually silent.

The westering sun laid the shadow of the hotel across the gravel square where they sat. It was positively a little chilly.

There seemed to be nobody in the hotel. Even Madame had left the caisse. Only Marcel could be heard wrangling ceaselessly with Célestine in the back yard.

At last the time came when they could not

pretend to nibble their biscuits any longer. They put the lid on the tin, and screwed up the thermos.

Evie looked anxious.

"Berthon has got brakes, hasn't he, Laura? It is only Jean who hasn't. I know Berthon has got no lights, because one night when we drove back late from Avignon we came the whole way without any. I begged him to get them seen to, but he said he never troubled. He said the police in these parts were an '*affaire de famille*.' So awfully French of him, wasn't it? I do hope to goodness they'll be back before dusk. They really are so reckless, these foreigners."

Laura too was listening with all her mind. Six o'clock. If Edward wasn't back soon they wouldn't get their walk.

Six. The bull-fight must have been over — when? Half-past three? Four?

Of course nothing could have happened to them. Berthon was a marvellous driver, for all his seeming recklessness.

And yet, horrid little fears crept about at the back of her mind.

Evie and she dropped into long silences of listening.

At last they questioned each other's eyes. Surely that was the sound of a horn away at the end of the village, down by the Tarascon cross-roads?

And then — ah, there was no doubt of that —

the roar of Berthon's motor came up the village street, grew to its climax at the other side of the hotel, and stopped.

They went into the hall.

"What happened to you?" called Evie, as the others unpacked themselves from the car.

"Was it lovely? Did you all enjoy it?"

"Nothing," called Victory, "nothing happened."

"So much happened"—Claire came up to them—"that I nearly did not come home at all."

"We got late," said Edward, "because fifty kilometres more or less are all the same to Berthon."

"Beastly wild-geese chase!" muttered Peter. "Filthy waste of time really."

"There wasn't any fight," said Bun.

"But we saw the bulls," said Billy.

"And we saw the Marquis, and the Arabs—only there weren't any except one."

"And the boy had broken his arm the day before on it."

"And we didn't see the bulls there—there weren't any, only mosquitoes. We saw them at the fight——"

"Only there wasn't a fight."

"In their stable, in their boxes—no stalls."

Billy and Bun were both screaming at once.

"I can't understand a word," said Evie.

"Come and have some tea and tell me quietly."

"We had some chocolate on our way through

Tarascon: I don't know if anybody wants tea on the top of it. Personally what I want is to stretch my legs: they're most infernally cramped."

Laura's heart beat faster. She looked up expectantly.

"Victory, aren't you stiff? Will you come for a turn before dinner?"

Oh, heavens! Had they noticed her expectancy? Laura felt the blood sweep up her face and throb in her head.

A sickening disappointment weighed like a stone in her heart.

She turned to Claire. She screwed up all her courage to master her voice. "Do come and tell us, Clairey. We do so want to hear, don't we, Evie?" And she put her arm through Claire's and went with her through the hall and into the garden again.

Evie followed them.

Laura forced her thoughts away from Edward. She would *not* think. She would not. She would not.

"Well, Clairey, was the fight as glorious as Berthon says it is?"

He hadn't once looked at her. He had been completely absorbed in getting away with Victory.

"There wasn't a fight at all."

But why *should* he look at her? Why should she imagine that because he was her friend he had to single her out?

"No fight? But why on earth ——"

What in Heaven's name did she expect? Did she want the man to be in love with her?

"A shower of rain ——"

"Goodness gracious, *rain?*" said Evie.

"There wasn't any rain here," said Laura.

"Blue and sun," said Evie.

Why, she might be Claire! That was just what people said about women — that they had no conception of being friends with a man.

"Biscuits! biscuits!" sang Bun. "Swine, to take the last sugar one!"

"— and the ground was slippery — or they said it was — and by the time it had dried half the audience had gone, and I gathered from Berthon that the Jew who runs the financial side of the show thought ——"

Friend! friend! friend! Didn't she know the meaning of the word friend? Edward might be head over ears in love with Victory and still be her friend. Why should she feel that he wasn't her friend because he might be Victory's lover?

It wasn't a new thing that he cared for Victory. She had known it before, only she had put it away at the back of her mind. . . . Marquis? What was Claire saying about a Marquis?

"There would have been a fight all right, you say, if M. le Comte . . .?"

"Laura! Petite idiote! Haven't I just told you that it is M. le Comte who owns all the bulls, breeds them out on the Camargue? There was a special stand against the church wall for him

and the curé; but he'd had the most frightful fall from one of his unbroken Arabs."

"Un chute!" sang Bun.

Had she imagined that Edward was in love with her? Of course she hadn't! Ah, but if she was perfectly square with herself, what else did it amount to really? No, *not* in-loveness! At least none of the things that in-loveness implied — none of its consequences, fulfilments, or reciprocations. . . .

That sounded grand enough! But, after all, if she wanted the kind of friendship that put her first among her sex, the kind of friend who would take a sort of tenderly kind interest in her. . . . Could she, for instance, honestly fit it in with Edward in love with somebody else, even if she were perfectly honest in thinking that she didn't want him to be in love with herself? Edward married, say . . . "Well, Edward, how is Victory? How is Victory and the baby?" Oh, undoubtedly the baby made it far easier, because in a minute, from it, she could picture Edward bored to tears with it, and thankful to escape into an atmosphere of — oh, put it plainly — of *her*. . . .

"— alone in that hovel, living en garçon with his grooms," Claire was saying.

"And one of the grooms had broken his arm too, and we saw him leading about one of the unbroken Arabs. Awfully small; and it didn't look really fierce — more of a pony, you might think; and we didn't see the Comte, because he

was in bed after his chute." Bun had got a good bit in that time.

"Berthon said he would undoubtedly have come out to show us round himself. He is tremendously proud of his breeds, both the bulls and the horses: the horses are the pure Saracen ——"

"They have to have them pretty small and nippy to ride in the bulls."

"Don't interrupt, Bun, when Miss Drayton is talking." Evie was firm.

"Starved for intelligent companionship. Think of it, Laura!" Claire was so determined that Laura should think of it, that she took hold of Laura's arm in an effort to hold her thought.

"Think of it! All alone there, out on the Camargue, in that utter desolation, fifty kilometres from anywhere, utterly alone with his peasants and his beasts. He's a tremendous Provençal, of course."

"He's a brave homme, Berthon says, and there is a motto over the door beginning with 'lou' something or other, and 'lou' is Provençal for 'the' ——"

"Bun, I told you to shut up."

"But how did you get there? I mean, what made you go there?"

Laura hoped that Claire hadn't already explained this.

"But I told you, Laura ——"

Oh, dear! Claire was distinctly offended!

"Berthon took us there to show us the bulls. He is devoted to M. le Comte. The peasants worship him. And if he had not been laid up, Berthon says that he would undoubtedly have welcomed us himself. As it is, he is lying in that hovel with no one but his stable-boys to nurse him. His wife — some flimsy creature from Paris, no doubt — left him two years ago. She couldn't stand the life there — no woman could, Berthon said. God, these women!"

Claire stood up and flung her scarf round her neck with a magnificent gesture of indignation.

"I'm going in, Laura. I want to be by myself."

"Oh, dear!" whispered Evie. "Was it Bun, do you think? As a matter of fact, I'm going in too, so I think perhaps I'll just take her the 'Daily Mail.' Coming, Laura?"

Laura shook her head.

Bun had adopted Quiqui. "Little Prince," she was whispering to him. "Little pink-eyed princekin!"

Quiqui drew back his lip and snarled.

"Be careful of him, Bun! You know how he bites! I'm just going"—oh, where was she going?—"down the village a little way."

They would be bound to have gone the other way, to the mountains. Down the village led nowhere except on to the straight road to Avignon, where no one would choose to walk.

And yet she looked carefully both ways up and

down the street before she stepped out from the shelter of the yard door.

The street was empty. The light was going.

She wanted to get away with her thoughts, to sort them and arrange them in some sort of reasonably comfortable position.

It wasn't so very difficult once she was quiet enough to think.

She had been excited by her friendship with Edward. No need to blame herself — all excitement was apt to be silly and untrue, but one couldn't live without a modicum of it. And if there was an element of what the modern person would call "sex" in the excitement — well — But she wasn't in the least sure that there was. If she asked herself whether she would have found it just as exciting to make friends with Evie — no, but that wasn't a bit fair. Evie was Evie. . . . But she could imagine that if Edward were a woman she would have felt exactly the same thrill when she first discovered him. But, then, could Edward be a woman? Well, whether he could or couldn't, what had actually swept her off her feet had been the swiftness of the friendship. She was not used to making friends quickly — in fact, as a rule, she scarcely made new friends at all.

It was the element of protectiveness in Edward's attitude to her that had got her at once; it was what had got her with Claire. And then there was the flattery. Oh yes, there was no blinking that — the satisfaction to her vanity that any one

like Edward had picked her out to be his friend — had preferred her to talk to and walk with. . . .

But it wasn't all vanity. There was the insatiable need of having some one to whom you mattered more than any one else — some one who was, in that sense, your own. . . .

Ah, but she had had that! Couldn't she be satisfied — rest in what she had had?

She strained her mind's eye back along her memory.

"Lellie . . . Lellie, you were mine . . ." she said to her.

Lellie. . . . But she could see nothing, but, very remotely, a little girl in a holland dress who laughed and made a face at her. . . .

What an odd scrap-heap one's memory was! And never the right scraps on the top when one stirred in it. . . .

Generally she could remember Lellie so easily.

Teddie. . . . Rather delicately she looked for a piece of her past which had lain almost untouched for a long time now. It was very, very rarely during the last years that she had needed to remember Teddie. And he never obtruded himself now. He had slipped right back into a mistiness that was almost oblivion.

But now she wanted him. She wanted to show herself that he had been hers; that she had had that kind of love too; that she *had* it, of course. . . .

"Teddie." She said the name to herself very

softly and tenderly. But nothing happened in her heart.

She looked hard into her memory. She stood again face to face with him. She leant up against his khaki tunic. She laid her face on his sleeve. . . .

"Teddie, my great big fierce bear. . . ."

"Little cub . . . little tiny cub. . . ."

He ought to have crushed her tight in his arms. She ought to have felt again the nobs of his buttons press into her body. . . .

But nothing happened. No emotion came to her. They were just two ghosts standing there echoing the ghosts of words. . . .

She gave a little sob. It was unexpected. She had no idea that it was lurking in her throat.

Life was utterly lonely when you couldn't even find your dead.

And there was nothing like self-pity for making you cry!

She turned back along the road.

It was getting dusk — the dark comes quickly in Provence.

She was at the Church. "Soyez bien petit. . . ." Yes, that was the trouble! If one could be truly humble. . . .

Was anybody? . . . Evie, perhaps. But *she* wasn't. If she was, she wouldn't think that she had a right to so much in life.

First! Why, good Lord, who was she to expect to be anywhere with anybody?

She ought to be glad and grateful for anything

that anybody could spare her in the way of affection or interest.

She thought she would go into the church for a moment, and think there about humility; *want* it — pray for it, if you liked to call it so.

She was in the porch when the leather door was pushed open almost against her, and through it flung the girl, Coucou.

She almost touched Laura, but she did not show any sign of seeing her. She went past her quickly, down the steps, and ran up the hill towards the hotel.

She was gone in a moment, and it was so dark that Laura could not see her clearly, and yet she was quite certain that she had seen a white face with a strangely tragic expression, and she was sure, absolutely sure, that the girl had been crying. And yet it was far too dark for her to have seen her tears.

When she was gone Laura tried to prove her conviction, but she searched her mind in vain for something in the girl's attitude or movements that could have made her sure.

But no, she couldn't remember anything. She pushed open the door of the church.

Perhaps the girl had been to Confession.

Did they have Confessions on Sunday nights?

But the church was dark and empty. There was no light but the sanctuary lamp, a tiny live flame crouching and springing in its ruby glass prison.

But there was another light. Behind her, to the left of the door, there was an altar to the Sacred Heart, and some one had lighted candles to the foolish sentimental statue.

Candles . . . three of them.

Was it the girl who had lighted them? They were scarcely burnt.

Three of them. But why three? Surely three candles burning together were supposed to be unlucky?

She tapped at Evie's door when she went upstairs.

"Evie," she called softly, "can I not change for dinner as it's Sunday, and I'm so late?"

Evie opened the door, and (there was not the faintest doubt about it this time) Evie had been crying.

CHAPTER VI

LAURA had her breakfast in her room. She wasn't anything like dressed when Claire came to see if she was ready, and Claire seemed quite willing to leave her alone.

Laura dawdled about her room for a long time. She felt reluctant to begin the new day.

She washed her face several times in cold water, but it failed to wash away the muddled, uneasy feelings of the night.

It was a great relief to her that there seemed to be nobody in the garden but Evie and Peter and Bun.

Evie had her letter-case spread on the table, and was writing busily. There was never any end to the letters that Evie wrote. Laura felt sure that she remembered the birthdays and Christmases of everybody she had ever met who was in need of company on those anniversaries.

Evie looked tired, and her dear kind eyes smiled out from rather swollen lids.

"Hullo, Laura! I thought every one had deserted us. Victory's not up yet, and I haven't seen Edward, and I've had to send Billy up to his room." She lowered her voice so that Bun and Peter should not hear. "He's learning some extra Latin there. It is so seldom that he is really naughty nowadays, and I do think perhaps

dear Peter was a little sharp with him. I really don't think that boy is quite the thing, Laura. He's generally so very patient with the children. . . . So he's giving Bun a dictée ——"

Laura looked round. Peter was standing, unsmiling and majestic, over the table at which Bun was sitting. Bun was scarlet and obviously distraught.

Peter was reading very clearly, word by word. His young face looked haggard and grim.

"C'est un défaut," he read, "dont j'ai honte, mais dont je n'ai jamais pu me corriger ——"

"Pu me what?"

"Cor-ri-ger — correct — you might know that!"

"Comme je suivais le littoral ——"

But "littoral" was too much for Bun. In an agony of apprehension she sucked the nib of her fountain pen, and some seconds had to be spent in blotting her tongue.

"Laura!" It was Claire's voice calling.

"She's over there in the hammock," said Evie. "Take a chair with you if you're going to sit by her, Laura. I wouldn't trust the grass."

Laura took a chair and went.

"Sit by me, Laura — talk to me — read to me. I want the time to pass."

"Nothing *wrong*, Clairey?"

"Nothing wrong. I'll tell you afterwards — when I know. Not now. Don't ask me questions. Read to me."

“‘Chartreuse de Parme.’ . . . But must it be French, Claire? You know I can’t read it for cocoanuts. Isn’t there something English?”

“No, nothing. Don’t be self-conscious, Laura!”

She couldn’t argue with Claire when she was in this sort of mood, so she took the book and plunged into what seemed to her a medley of the strangest sounds. And if she let her attention wander for the fraction of a second, she was aware that the sounds became gibberish. Mercifully Claire seemed to be so absorbed in her own thoughts that she didn’t pull her up half as often as she might have done.

Victory came out with the ringing of the luncheon bell.

Edward came out on her heels.

Evie seemed to be more nervous than usual with Victory.

Billy was retrieved by Bun from his bedroom. He was speechless with gloom.

The meal was an unusually silent one. Even the food wasn’t as enjoyable as usual. There was tête-de-veau, which nobody liked except Billy, who had a passion for it, and he refused it with a bravado which made him miserable.

There was nobody to watch, because Monsieur Poulenc and his wife and the Lefebvre family always had their luncheon inside in the salle-a-manger. And the old earwigs had evidently gone for an expedition. And the girl and her men always took their meal out with them.

They were all glad when it was time to scatter again.

Evie ventured on a tentative attempt at a plan for the afternoon.

"Does any one" — she looked round them — "want to do anything in particular? *Ought* we to see something, do you think? We shall have to do the Saintes Maries one day."

"We can't," said Claire. "Berthon's out. He won't be back before three o'clock at the earliest."

"Then come up with me, Victy; I do so want a word with you about plans." Evie was nervous.

Victory lit a cigarette. "As you like," she said in her tired voice, and she followed Evie into the hotel.

"Edward, I want to see you for a moment," said Peter. "Billy and Bun, you'd better cut off and find Oreste if you're going to fetch the asparagus with him. He said he was starting directly the déjeuner was finished."

Edward and he strolled down the garden path.

"Claire?" Laura almost laughed. All the world seemed to be pairing for confidences. "Shall we ——? What shall we do?"

"Personally, I want to be by myself for a couple of hours. I shall walk somewhere."

"Shall I meet you anywhere? Say at three?"

"At three I must be back for Berthon ——"

"For *Berthon*?"

"Yes. You need not ask questions. I shall tell you afterwards. And meantime I don't want you, Laura — I don't want any company but my own. Understand?"

The only thing that Laura understood was that Claire wanted to be alone, so she said, "Yes" to that.

"I'm going to get my hat and stick. If you like to be here by, say, half-past three, I'll talk to you then."

Claire was grave. She went into the hotel.

Laura was left alone with Quiqui. She stroked him. "Well, Quiqui, there's only you and me. Want a walkie?" Quiqui wagged his two inches of tail in such passionate acceptance that his whole hindquarters wagged with it.

"Quiqui, darling!" He was rather a comfort when one felt lonely. She half thought she'd take him back to England with her — if it wasn't for that beastly quarantine. He'd be company for her in the flat. It was the right thing for an old maid to have a cat or a dog to dote on. She was just about at the stage to start on one or the other.

Oh, but what nonsense! Old-maidishness was only a state of mind. Your condition in life was just exactly what you were capable of thinking it.

She would go up to the mountains now that she could have them to herself. She wanted to

shake herself out of the depression that clung to her. It wasn't quite so easy as you might suppose to come to terms with yourself. You could say things in your mind, acquiesce in them with all your understanding, and yet somewhere underneath your mind and your will there seemed to be a layer on which you could make very little impression, a layer of feelings — moods, memories, cravings.

And these things were as impalpable as a fog; there was no catching hold of them and saying "Get out with you." That was the devil of it. You could see perfectly clearly that such and such a road was your road, and that you had only to follow it and everything would be perfectly all right for you — just as it should be — and all the time, beneath your excellent reason, a senseless mood would persist and make you feel that everything was useless and unhappy and terribly tiring.

It was one's impotence that was so infuriating. One might reason and reason with oneself, and fail to make the smallest impression on one's mood, and then perhaps some chance happening, a word of praise or affection from somebody, a letter, a smile, the most irrelevant and trivial incident, would make all the difference. Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! What a feeble creature she was!

She was climbing the track through the big pine wood to the left of the gorge when she heard steps behind her.

She looked round. "Edward!"

She wished that she had not been thinking of him at that moment. She had the ridiculous feeling that he might have overheard her.

"Laura!" Edward was out of breath. "You can't think the chase I've had. Why, in Heaven's name, did you bolt off like that without saying a word?"

"Bolt? But I didn't. But why shouldn't I?"

"Well, you might at least have told me where you were going. I might never have found you if it hadn't been for the old woman breaking stones down at the corner who told me that she'd seen you come this way."

"But ——" Laura felt herself gaping at him; but, after all, what could she say? She couldn't say to him that she had no reason to suppose that he would want her.

"I didn't know you wanted a walk," she tried. It sounded lame.

"A walk! Why should I want a walk?"

"I don't know," said Laura, more helplessly stupid than ever.

"Oh, don't be a fool, Laura! You must have known perfectly well that I should want to see you to-day — after yesterday."

"Yesterday? Oh!" A sudden flash illuminated her mind.

He wanted to tell her about Victory. Well, now for it! This was the moment she would be, or would cease for ever to be, his friend.

She braced herself with all her strength and faced him with a smile.

"You mean to tell me about you and Victory? Of course I did so long to hear, but I thought perhaps you wouldn't want to ——"

"Victory? What in God's name do you mean, Laura?"

"Aren't you — isn't she — I mean I thought ——" Laura was undone.

"Laura, have you gone off your head? I know you too well to suggest that you are being coy. Don't you know, my dear little fool, can you possibly pretend *not* to know that I care for you?"

"Care for *me*?" Had he really said that?

"But I thought — I thought Victory ——"

"*Victory*? You thought I was in love with Victory? Why, I wouldn't touch her with the end of a barge-pole! I pity the poor devil who falls in love with Victory! Laura"—his voice was gentle again; he put both his hands on her arms and held them there — "little silly Laura. . . ." He gave her a tiny shake. "You must know perfectly well that I care for you. . . ."

"But I don't know — I don't — honestly I don't." Laura's terror was in her voice.

"Little silly! How could you *not* know? Here, you look as white as a sheet. Sit down!" He pushed her gently to the bank. "There, lean against the tree." He sat by her side.

"Listen. I didn't want to care for you. You know I'm thirty-eight, and I thought I saw my

way clear, had put all that sort of thing behind me. As a matter of fact I never included marriage in my scheme, I've always tried to escape it. But I've got enough to make you quite comfortable, Laura. I'll tell you about that presently, though a lot you care for ways and means! But all the same you must hear.

"But this is just talk. Laura, look at me! Say you knew. Say it's all right."

He took both her hands in his.

"Oh, Edward!" She was shaking like a leaf. Passion surged up in him.

"Little thing . . ." He put his arms round her. His senses swam in the forgotten ecstasy, as he felt her body against his body. The sharp sweetness quivered and flamed through all his senses. He bent down his head and pressed his mouth on her mouth.

"Oh, no, no, no! Don't. You mustn't. You can't."

She strained her head away. She struggled in his arms.

She freed herself. She got to her feet. She stood there panting and staring down at him. With the back of her hand she scrubbed at her mouth, scrubbing away his kiss.

"You can't," she gasped. "I can't have it. I don't want it — ever — ever —"

He got up and stood by her side.

"Not ever, ever, ever."

They stood there and stared at each other.

He felt that he was staring at a stranger. The woman he had held in his arms was not his Laura. . . . But neither was this white-faced girl who stared at him and rubbed at her mouth.

"Never, never, never. . . ."

They stared at each other with a sort of surprise, two strangers who found themselves in this place and did not know how they had come there. He took a tremendous pull at himself.

He fought hard with himself to recapture his intimacy with her. And yet he felt as if he were talking to an acquaintance.

He must take it on trust that she was Laura, that quite soon he would know her again to be the Laura of whom he was so fond. Meantime he must say the things that he ought to say. "I'm sorry, Laura. . . ."

She tried, too, at that. "Oh, I'm sorry, Edward. . . . I . . . You don't understand. All that side is over for me. . . . I don't ever, ever, ever want to know it again. I couldn't, I hate it too much. . . . And oh! if you could understand how long it has taken me to get where I am! You see, even if I didn't hate it, I could never risk being so hurt again — going back to where I'd be at the mercy of — of all my feelings.

"I want . . . Edward, I did love your friendship — you do believe that — but I want . . . I've tried so hard to get further and further away — more detached. . . . I've hated everything that embroiled me again — my horrid little vanities,

my wanting for people to like me, my wanting of the things I don't want. . . .

"Oh, do, *do* try to understand. . . ."

"Laura, have you any right to refuse life like this?"

But did she mean to refuse it? He stared at the frightened, white-faced girl. Was she not just scared? Protecting herself (subconsciously, perhaps) from her own emotion?

"Laura, try to think truthfully."

He remembered, quite clearly, from the past, that she was truthful.

"Refuse? Oh, but I have the right — I told you. Besides, for me it isn't refusal, it's trying to get through as best I can, in the way I see. . . ."

"Get through to what? Running away won't get you anywhere."

"Edward"—she came nearer to him—"I can't talk — I'm in too much of a muddle to say what I mean. . . . I don't know that I ever could say it. . . . But what it all comes to is that I know that marrying"—her face and neck were flooded with crimson—"all that side of life isn't for me. But don't, oh, please don't, not know how I like your friendship, and let that go on and don't let that have to be spoilt."

Ah, that was more like Laura! He recovered a little of his intimacy with her.

"I frightened you, little Laura — I took far too much for granted. I was so absolutely sure that you knew, and that you felt as I do. . . .

Don't talk now. Don't try to answer me. Think quite quietly. I'm going to leave you to walk back alone."

"But thinking is just what I won't do: I'm not going to think about what's happened ever again. I'm going back to where we were before, Edward."

"You can never do that," he said.

No, she could never do that. . . .

How could she forget? His burning mouth burnt her still. . . .

She rubbed her lips again with her handkerchief.

Oh, how she hated men! His hateful, burning mouth. . . . His burning breath. . . . His arms crushing her body — his hands. . . .

Pah! She shook her body inside her clothes.

And he had been so sure of her! He had thought that she would tumble into his mouth like ripe fruit! Oh, how revolting it was!

And all spoilt! All spoilt! Their lovely friendship, all spoilt. How could they save it now? The little flat would be empty. . . . No, Edward. It's no use. . . . We can't get back, can we?

Ah, how lonely! And they had been such good friends. . . . Dear Edward! . . .

And it wasn't Victory. A horrid little triumph chirruped inside her. "He wanted me," it sang, "he wanted me. He was mad for me!"

Mad for her? Passion was mad! Bestial! His face, his eyes, his teeth — animal! No,

never, never, never, never would she endure it. . . .

Edward, dear Edward! . . . She tried to call him back so that she might measure her loss.

Gentle Edward. . . . She couldn't reach him. . . .

And all the time she heard with disgust the triumphant chirrup, "He wanted me, he wanted me. . . ."

"No, no, no," she cried to herself — there were tears in her eyes — "that's nothing to do with it — nothing at all. Nothing."

Edward might have said that his emotions were simpler.

As he followed the track up through the pine wood, walking fast, swinging his stick at the orchises as he passed, he tried to think that he had lost nothing of Laura that time and a little patience would not regain.

She was obviously fond of him, far fonder than she knew.

He had frightened her — he struck savagely at the orchis of the moment — but she was crying out all the time for companionship, protection, love. It was inconceivable that she should refuse them when they were hers for the taking.

A little patience and he would know just how to quiet her fear. A little patience — a little waiting — a very little waiting. . . .

And yet all the time a doubt sneaked about his mind.

She was a queer creature — sensitive — super-sensitive.

These refusals, these repulsions, were deep-rooted sometimes.

And he knew, as he had not known until then, that he wanted her so much that he didn't care to look at his life without her. Little dear Laura! His little dear Laura! . . .

Laura was dismayed when she saw Claire waiting for her outside the hotel. She was in no way ready for her.

She pulled her hat down over her eyes, and stepped out briskly. But she felt sure that nothing she could do would make any difference to Claire. She would read her face in a moment and ask her what had happened. But when she came nearer she was thankful to see that Claire was wrapped in some emotion of her own. She was standing straight and still, with her arms crossed and her chin tipped up. She was in one of her moods when she felt like Dido on Carthage sands, or some one of that sort. She scarcely relaxed as Laura came up to her.

"I am waiting for you. Come up to my room."

"All right, Clairey." Laura felt meek.

Claire strode ahead. Laura followed her like a dog. They processed in silence through the hall, and up the stairs and along the passage.

Claire shut the door of her room.

"Sit down, Laura."

Laura sat on the bed.

Claire strode to the window and back to the door and back to the window again. Unfortunately there was very little space for striding. Claire felt this, for she stopped in front of the bed and leant up against the wardrobe.

She fixed Laura with her eyes. "Laura, I've something to tell you."

"Yes," said Laura.

"You know what it is? You've guessed?"

"No." Laura shook her head.

"You haven't guessed that what I have to tell you is to do with M. le Comte?"

"The Comte! Oh! Oh, no!" Laura felt herself gaping.

"No. I suppose you wouldn't have guessed. And yet, after what I told you yesterday, I thought you might have felt something. Never mind."

Laura's clenched hands were damp with apprehension.

"Do tell me, Clairey."

"Yes, I'm going to tell you. You know that I never believe in shirking life — that my great idea is to have sufficient courage to meet fate face to face on the spot. Well, yesterday — I told you what I had seen — I made up my mind there and then that there was something worth while for me to do.

"Here was a fine man — quite obviously a fine man. Indeed, who knows if he isn't rather a

great man? I should say, from the things that Berthon has told me, that he is great in his own way. Here he was, starving for want of the very things which I could give him — understanding, sympathy in his work, companionship — the companionship of a mind attuned to his own.

“Well, I saw that there was this thing that I could do; I felt in a way that I had to do it — that it was up to me, since scarcely any other woman would have the courage. He might never meet another. . . .

“I would have done it on the spot — gone up to see him; but I knew the sort of scene your Evie would have made. Those conventional women always have such obscene minds. And it would be absolutely out of the question to try to explain anything to a brain like hers. As a matter of fact, though, I did see him — I am pretty well certain that I saw him looking out of one of the upper windows. A fine head. . . . Very much what I had expected.”

“Claire, you didn’t ——”

“Didn’t what?”

Laura didn’t know what. The possibilities of what Claire might have done were too ghastly for her to visualise them.

“What I did was this. I waited until we got home, and then I wrote him a letter describing myself and telling him how I understood entirely what I was offering him, and that I was prepared to come to him — at once if he wished it.”

"You didn't!"

"I did. I wrote very fully. I gave the letter to Berthon this morning early, and he undertook to deliver it for me and to wait for an answer. He couldn't get back before three."

"And he did? He took it?" Laura was scarlet.

Claire nodded. She was quite composed. "Yes, he took it and gave it to M. le Comte with his own hands."

"And the Comte? Oh, Claire!"

Claire tilted up her chin. Her face took an expression of exaltation.

"He read the letter, and then he tore it into small bits and burnt them in front of the stove. He lit the pieces with matches and watched until they had burnt to ashes. He told Berthon to tell me exactly what he had done."

"Claire, it was insulting of him! In front of Berthon!"

"I think it was the most perfect gesture."

Laura gaped. "To throw it in the fire in front of Berthon and to tell him to tell you!"

"Throw it in the fire! Have you never heard the expression 'burnt offering,' *sacrifice*? He would not accept so much.... He was evidently afraid that I might insist. And so he made his sacrifice. He knew from my letter that I should understand a gesture like that. Why, if he hadn't meant me to understand something by it, he could have put my letter in the

waste-paper basket. A fine gesture! I could never ask for a finer!"

"Claire, how could you!" Laura's indignation burst out of her. "He's probably a beast of a man. You know nothing at all about him except what Berthon has told you — which is the same as nothing at all."

"I tell you I saw his face looking out of the window. A particularly fine head. . . ." Claire was dreamy.

"His face! But do try to imagine what he might be like if you came to be close to him. Think if he *kissed* you! Oh, do for heaven's sake try to think what it would be like if he had said yes to you! Do you imagine that it would all be a question of *minds* — of his *work*? You can't possibly pretend like that! Think of him in bed! Oh, think of him breathing over you, touching you! Think of him when he hadn't shaved, with his face covered with bristles. Think of him like that, and perhaps you'll begin to have some notion of what you did. The beasts that men are! I hate them — men as men! I think you're stark mad!"

"And since when have you known so much about men, Laura?" Claire was angry at last. "I should like to know since when it is that you've hated men like this."

Laura had left Quiqui out in the street.

She had to go down to fetch him.

He took no notice of her calling. He was

absorbed in paying lascivious attentions to the mongreless from the baker's.

Laura smacked him soundly when she caught him, at the imminent risk of being bitten.

Laura was washing her face when Evie tapped at her door.

In moments of confusion or disgust she always washed her face if it was possible to do so. It nearly always made her feel better. She was finishing with a sponge-full of cold water when she heard Evie's voice.

"Come in, Evie," she called, and dried her face.

"Laura, am I bothering you? I felt that I had to come and tell you, because I do feel now that I've been so wrong and so untrusting. I know you must have noticed that I was upset about something. I don't know if you've guessed."

"No, no, nothing." Laura was horrified at the suggestion. She was determined not to guess anything about anybody.

"Sit down, Evie dear." She cleared her books and her hat from the chair. She sat herself on the window-ledge.

It was a help sometimes to have one's back to the light.

"Yes, Evie?"

"It's about Victory. You know after the Jackmans left — I didn't like them, did you, Laura? In spite of them being so clever and

interesting — really *very* interesting he was that night at dinner, wasn't he? Well, directly they'd gone I knew there was something wrong with Victory, and she told me on Sunday — yesterday that was — that Mrs. Jackman had suggested that she should go with them to Paris to sit to some sculptor they know. An artist's model, Laura! Imagine what I felt! I think it must have been only for the face, don't you? I mean they couldn't possibly have been thinking of the other thing, could they? But, all the same, think of being with that sort of people! I felt it would break my heart. I didn't know what to do. I nearly came to you, Laura, because you are so understanding, but in the end I decided I would go to Edward, because I sometimes feel, don't you, that a man can do so much? And he is so sympathetic. Don't you think so, Laura? Haven't you got to like him very much?"

"Yes." Laura was glad that she had her back to the window. Surely Evie could see very little of her face against the glare of the sun outside.

"Well, I begged him to help me, and he promised me that he'd do his best. I think he must have had a good talk to her when he took her out yesterday evening. Anyway, when I got her to come up to my room this afternoon she told me almost straight away that she had given up the idea, anyhow for the present. She said it was because it would be much too much of a fag. But I think that was her way of giving in,

and trying not to seem as if she was. Don't you think so, Laura?

"And then, I'm afraid, I was silly. You know I was so awfully relieved, and I did feel that he must have had so much more influence over her than I had thought he could have, so I asked her if she didn't *like* him. She said of course she did. But of course I didn't mean like that. So I asked her point blank if she had ever thought she could be *fond* of him. I know I shouldn't have, Laura — I know perfectly well that it was silly of me."

"And what did she say?" How ridiculous of her to want to know!

"She said she'd just as soon spend the rest of her life with 'Reading Without Tears,' or was it 'Laugh and Learn'? Anyhow, I suppose she meant that it would be like marrying a lesson book!"

"But he isn't in the least like a lesson book. I never met anybody less so." Oh, but really, that she should feel indignant with Victory! She was being more than ridiculous now!

"Evie, come out!" She jumped up off the window-ledge. "What I want is exercise."

As they came out of the hotel they almost bumped into Peter.

He said "Hullo," but he did not look at them. He went straight past them into the hotel.

The door had hardly settled down behind him

when Laura heard it swing violently again, and Peter leapt down the steps and was by her side.

"Do you know where Edward is?" He was grave and urgent.

"Nothing *wrong*, Peter?" asked Evie.

"No, nothing whatever. But I want to get hold of him if you happen to know where he is."

"I haven't seen him since lunch," said Evie.

"I think" — Laura nearly stamped her foot at herself for turning red like that — "I think he's somewhere on the mountains."

"Thanks awfully! I shall try to find him." And without a look or a smile, Peter was off, striding up the road.

"Oh, Laura, what has happened? What *is* wrong with him?"

But Laura was determined not to speculate.

"Don't let's go to the mountains," she said.

"Let's go down the Avignon road."

"But isn't it rather dull?"

"Dull? Oh, no, I don't think so. Anyway, do let's try it."

She led Evie firmly by the arm.

Peter met Edward at the monuments. If Edward had not got so far on his way home, he would probably have missed him altogether. And yet he was not wholly glad that he had found him. In fact, the urge to confide in him, to confess to him, grew suddenly feeble when he saw him.

He thought rapidly. Oh, emphatically, the only thing to do was to trust the force which had driven him to this point.

But he would have to plunge quickly, while he still remembered what he had felt.

"Hullo, Edward!"

"Hullo, Peter!"

"I want to talk to you."

"Which way shall we go?"

"I don't care. Anywhere. Down the way you were going."

They swung along side by side in silence, and soon Peter realised that they might easily go on in silence all the way, and that he might find himself back at the hotel before he had begun to say what he had to say. The only thing to do was to go head down into it.

"Look here, Edward. I suppose you know what you've meant to me for a good time now."

"All right, let's cut that."

"Rather! Of course. It's eminently not sayable. But look here, I can't feel square with you unless I tell you that there's practically nothing left of me that you could count on as a friend. I can't give a curse for anybody or anything but that girl."

"Coucous?"

"Coucous. I suppose it was inevitable — that I should fall in love, I mean. Women were bound to come along for me some time or other; all the more as I've kept so clear of them up till

now. But look here, I thought it was the usual kind of thing — nothing that I need talk to you about — until to-day."

"Why, what has happened to-day?"

"Well, just what it amounts to is that since to-day I'd chuck up everything, go with her anywhere she'd let me, play the fool to any extent. I may even chuck up Evie. If she gives me the chance I shall. I shall go after her to Corsica, or go back with her anywhere. Of course I know that it will pass in time. Three months — I daresay that that's pretty well all I need give myself. I don't generally stick to any one emotion longer than that. But now, while it's got me, I'm done. I may do absolutely anything."

"But you don't know the girl. You haven't even spoken to her."

"Yes, I have — I talked to her for a long time this afternoon."

Peter's face was changed by its expression of rapturous emotion.

"I'll tell you about it. I went up to the lake — I was feeling pretty well fed up — and there she was standing in the water. Her skirt was floating out round her. She was like some marvellous red lily."

"Standing in the lake? What in God's name was she doing that for?"

"Perhaps she loves water for some reason. She's very strange — amazingly strange. I didn't

ask her. She came out when she saw me. We knew each other at once."

"Well, she's seen you knocking about the hotel all this time."

"I don't mean that. I mean that we knew at once that we were intimates — we could talk from the first minute."

"Why? What did she talk about?"

"Everything." Peter flung an all-embracing glance round him — at the cow-byre, the road, the vines sprouting between the olive trees.

"She goes to-morrow?"

"She didn't know. She may, or she may not."

"I should think she must know. Madame's probably let her room."

"I don't know. She's very strange. She's not the least what you might imagine her to be. . . . She's a most amazingly strange creature. . . . If she does go to-morrow I may follow her. I probably shall. I shall if she will let me. . . . She said to me that she couldn't look ahead — that to-morrow may be an end or a beginning. . . ."

Edward looked at Peter. His face was changed, exalted. His eyes gazed over worlds seen for the first time.

Edward was touched.

"Why wasn't she with you? What happened?" he asked, gently and seriously.

"Oh" — Peter came a little way back to earth

again — “she was wet — very wet from the lake. She had to hurry back to change. It was I who made her hurry. She was shivering. But she didn’t want me to go back to the hotel with her — she said Madame might talk. . . . Edward ——”

Edward could see the boy recalling his thoughts, dragging them back to turn them to his friend.

“You do understand? It will pass — of course it will. I shall get through it. It’s only meantime that I feel that I shall be such a rotten kind of friend. It’s only meantime that I’m not here, so to speak. . . . I’m —— Oh, God knows where.”

“Heaven,” suggested Edward — “or hell?”

“Heaven or hell” — Peter considered them — “I haven’t a notion which. . . . Perhaps to-morrow ——”

“To-morrow?”

“Yes. She has a great feeling about to-morrow. They’re going at dawn. That will give her time. To-day is the last day. . . . I think to-morrow may take her somewhere quite different. Who knows where? ‘An end or a beginning’ — that was what she said. . . .”

Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench were buying table water. It had become almost a necessity that they should have something to drink in their bedroom at night. And of course one could not drink the water abroad. No foreign water was safe. It was not only the difficulty

about pills. Miss Ffrench had such command over herself that she could swallow hers without the aid of water directly she made up her mind to do so; but Miss Forster had to go through the most exhausting contortions. And sometimes — quite often, in fact — the pill would get the better of her altogether, and would either come jumping out of her mouth again in the most embarrassing fashion or would stick in her throat and melt there. Either way was most unpleasant. But it was *not* only the question of the pills. It was a question of a most intolerable thirst which attacked them each evening when they were preparing for bed. Even Miss Ffrench had to admit to it, while as for Miss Forster, she could scarcely speak her prayers to herself for the way her tongue clave to her mouth.

It was the foreign food. They would not really care to make this admission to any one else. It might so easily sound as if they had over-indulged, as if they had not used proper restraint; but between themselves (where, of course, there could be no question of such a misunderstanding) they did not attempt to blink the fact. Foreign food is very nice for a change (though for a permanency you could not compare it to good plain cooking), but it is undeniably upsetting.

They had some difficulty in deciding at which shop they should attempt to procure the table water.

Going into a foreign shop is always, Miss

Forster decided, the wee-est bit of a plunge. Foreign shopkeepers are so insistent. If they have not the article you require they will quite often try to press something quite other upon you, and one does not care to become involved in an argument.

At last, after looking through the window for some time, they decided on the *épicerie* opposite the church. It looked a nice shop, and as it was so near it was probably patronised by the clergy — or rather, by the priests, which wasn't quite the same, of course. And, besides, Miss Forster was almost certain that she could see bottles of Evian water on a shelf behind the counter.

There were two rather coarse-looking women in the shop, and the proprietress was making a noisy joke with them, which was a pity. But Agneta was so self-possessed! Miss Forster always admired the way in which she made herself felt. It was breeding that told — breeding, and, of course, her courage.

The women stopped laughing at once. The proprietress leant across her counter.

“Madame?”

“Une bouteille d'Evian, s'il-vous-plait.”

Miss Ffrench always spoke so naturally, almost as if it were her own language.

“Hein? Plait-il?”

What a terrible odour there was in the shop! Garlic, and — what was it? — that dreadful kind of cheese! Miss Forster felt quite hot with it.

"Une bouteille d'Evian." Miss Ffrench was beautifully clear, but it seemed as if these people didn't know their own language. They all began to jabber at once, evidently trying to explain to each other what she meant.

But Agneta kept her head. She seemed to be perfectly mistress of herself. She pointed with her parasol to the row of bottles.

"Une bouteille comme ça," she said.

Miss Forster had a spasm of nervousness in case the bottle should turn out to be spirits or something of that sort — she was a little short-sighted and could not make out the label at that distance. Providentially — oh, so providentially! — it was all right.

"Eviang!" shouted the proprietress. She really did pronounce it just like that. "Eviang!" And they all talked at once.

The next thing to do was to get the bottle wrapped up — to disguise it. It would never do, of course, that the hotel people should see it. They always expected one to purchase these things in the hotel. But Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench were experienced travellers. They knew quite well if one rang one's bell and ordered it the price it would come to! No, the thing to do was to buy it oneself and keep it in the dress cupboard. They had first been given the hint by that nice Miss Madge they had met at Cadenabbia, a daughter of General Madge. And they had been able to pass it on to quite a number of other travellers.

Of course the empty bottles were a little difficulty.

But by the time it came to them one had left, and it was very probable that the chambermaid would not take the trouble to speak about them.

But of course it was absolutely out of the question that one should be seen taking it in.

They rolled the bottle in a scarf which Miss Ffrench had brought with her for the purpose. Miss Forster felt just as if she were rolling a baby in a shawl.

Then Miss Forster put it under her arm, and Miss Ffrench draped the ends of the scarf at the back and the front so as to hide the projection.

Miss Forster pressed it to her side. She had to smile at herself when she found that she was feeling quite tender to it. It came of having said to herself that it was like a baby.

She was so very devoted to babies that even a silly thought like that made her want to cuddle it. Cuddle a bottle! Oh, dear me! What a mercy that Agneta could not see how silly she was! Of course she had always been so silly about her dolls. And even now when she saw a little girl playing with one she often felt that she could take it into her arms.

Miss Ffrench held open the swing door of the hotel for her to go through. She was glad to see that the hall was empty except for that nice Mrs. Vereker and the girl who was with her party. They had evidently just come in, and

were looking at the letter-board. Miss Forster looked too, in passing. Not that she expected a letter. And then — whether it was that she had become absent-minded for a moment while she was looking at the board, or whether it was that the relief of having got safely back made her unconsciously relax her arm — the bottle suddenly began to slip from her grip.

She clutched her elbow to her side with all her force, but the bottle continued to slide out backwards like a fish.

It seemed an eternity to her, and yet it could only have been the fraction of a second before it crashed to the tiles and lay broken into pieces.

People often talk about wishing that the ground could swallow them up, but very seldom could anybody wish it as she wished at that moment that she were under the tiles.

If only she could have fainted! And that might have softened Agneta.

Mrs. Vereker was exceedingly kind. She collected the pieces of glass, and she mopped up as much of the water as she possibly could with her handkerchief.

It was really incredible that one bottle could contain so much water. It made a veritable flood.

Mrs. Vereker's friend helped too, but she was not as good at it as Mrs. Vereker.

Madame came in before they had half finished. Miss Forster was sure that she would. And

though she pretended to be very nice, of course she knew all about it perfectly well.

One could see that she did, beneath all her affability.

Miss Forster very seldom cried nowadays. She had used to be perfectly awful about it at one time — a regular water-tap, her brothers had called her. But since she had been older she had quite mastered herself. Tears always made Agneta so exceedingly angry.

But this evening she could not help it; and Agneta could not possibly be angrier than she already was. She had even hinted that the whole thing — their whole friendship and living together — might be a mistake. And Miss Forster remembered that they had been warned by both sides — that was to say that Agneta's relations had warned Agneta and her relations had warned her. "Blood is thicker than water," her brother had said to her, though he had been married for over forty years and had never thought of asking her to live with him.

She cried until dinner-time. And the cry did her singularly little good.

Evie and the children were dressed for dinner long before any of the others.

Billy and Bun got so restless with waiting that she made them sit down and begin a game of dominoes.

Evie never minded how long she waited for

anybody. She knew what it was to be late herself, and how many things there always were to do at the last minute. And besides, while one was waiting there was sure to be something to be done, or else something quite interesting would turn up to fill the time.

This evening Madame came across to her and had quite a long chat. Madame was in great spirits — really excited, in fact — over the Coucou girl. She began at once.

“Vous avez vue Mam’selle Coucou?”

“Non.” Evie hadn’t seen her yet. The girl had gone in to dinner.

“Ah, mais elle est exquise. On ne peut pas imaginer comme elle est bien mise ce soir! ’er dress! Une robe de style — et puis la coiffure! She come in jus’ now in a state from de lake so she say, an’ she say to me, ‘Dere is no coiffeur ’ere,’ an’ I tell ’er dere is a ver’ good coiffeur in de grand place, an’ ’e ’ave done des merveilles! Tout le monde me dit comme elle est bien coiffée ce soir! Faut bien voir! It es de las’ night, et alors, vous savez!”

“Mais ils ne vont pas partez? Ils vont ensemble je veux dire à Corsica?”

“Vous avez raison. C’est pour quelques heures seulement qu’ils se séparent — mais!” Madame brandished her hands.

“Quand on est jeune, vous savez. A ver’ short time an’ for evare!” She nodded her head at Evie to show that they both understood what it was to be young.

At last the others came down. Peter and Laura came first, and Madame had to tell all over again about Mam'selle Coucou so that they should hear. And when Edward and Victory and Claire came down, Madame had to stop them to tell them to be sure to have a good look.

The girl was certainly worth looking at. Really, she shone! There was no other word for her.

To say that people shone, to talk of shining beauty, was so common — at least anyhow in books — but when you said it of this girl it really was quite accurately true.

She had changed her dress to-night. Generally she came in to dinner just as she was; but to-night she had put on a lovely picture dress of rose brocade with a silver pattern.

It had a tight bodice which showed her figure. Of course Evie never could quite like a girl to show her figure as much as that, though it certainly suited her, and she knew that girls did it in these days. The skirt must be very long as well as very full, because it lay in folds all round her chair. It was a stately dress. It gave Evie a new impression of the girl. She had had no idea that she was the sort of person who could afford to dress like that.

Her manners had not changed with her dress. Her table seemed to be noisier than ever. There was no end to their jokes. They had a special

bottle of wine as well as the ordinary wine that was compris with the dinner.

But Evie had to pull herself together. Really the whole lot of them seemed to be sitting there gaping! Nobody was saying a word to anybody — they were eating and staring.

Laura looked tired. She had one of her plain fits on her. It was extraordinary how she varied. To-night she looked quite old. She had such dark marks under her eyes, and her nose looked so much longer than usual. Dear Laura!

Of course she ought never to wear black. Sometimes she dressed herself so nicely; but that dabby black net was rather untidy.

But she must make an effort to talk.

"I say," she said brightly, "what about the Saintes Maries for to-morrow? We absolutely must do them."

"What exactly are they, Evie?"

Laura always did her best to respond.

"Well, it's a church, very old and interesting, where they're buried — the three Marys."

"Mary Beaton, Mary Seaton, Mary ——"

"No, Bun. The Holy Marys."

"What ones?"

Evie discovered that she wasn't sure.

"Mary Magdalene was one — I remember that. But she went off to Marseilles. Of course it must be frightfully lonely there, right out on the Camargue. I'm not sure about the others, but we can look them up. Anyhow, they were

buried there, and they let the coffin down into the church when the gypsies come, and it's all most interesting."

"On the Camargue?" said Claire. "Yes, I think we ought to go."

Peter was the only one who would not fall in with the plan. He said he didn't want to arrange anything for to-morrow, that he'd see when to-morrow came. It was so unlike him.

He was generally so enthusiastic, dear boy! Evie felt quite worried over him.

All the others joined in nicely, which was a mercy, and they decided that they would have to have breakfast all together at half-past eight, so as to be ready to start soon after nine.

Edward volunteered to go down the village with a message to Berthon.

The girl and her men were still drinking their coffee when they went into the hall. They were drinking liqueurs, too, and Evie was sorry for this, as she felt that they were all over-excited already.

They took a table and set their chairs quite near to the girl's table.

The girl was having a tremendous argument with the men.

They were insisting, it seemed, that they should come and say good-bye to her before they started in the morning, and she was insisting that they should not.

"I shall lock my door," she said.

"I shall take the key," retorted the fair young man, and he was off up the stairs in a moment. There was a yell of laughter from the other two.

"Scotched you this time, Coucou!"

"Lock it up, my precious!"

The fair one came back again, leaping down the stairs three at a time.

He stood over the girl and brandished the key at her.

"Aha! Aha!" he sang.

But the girl suddenly became perfectly quiet.

"Give it to me, Moses." She sat quite still. Her voice was tiny.

"Give it to me now." She put out her hand for it.

The fair young man turned red up to his curls, and put the key into her outstretched hand. She pushed it down the neck of her dress. It made a mark on her tight bodice.

"Thank you," she said, still very quiet. And then she laughed up at him. "I'm determined to have a good night for my last one."

"Your last night! I like that! What about ours? We shall have to get up in the dark."

And then the laughter and the noise began again.

Presently they decided that it was time for them to go out to the café for their game of billiards.

The girl's skirt swung nearly on the floor. It gave her such a different look.

"She's got on silver shoes and pink stockings. She might be going to a ball!" whispered Bun.

Madame stood admiring her. The girl stopped to pat her shoulder. "Faut que nous jouons ce soir comme c'est notre dernier soir."

Madame laughed and struck at her playfully. "You are a bad one, Mamselle Coucou!"

It must have been long after midnight when they came in. It is probable that Laura would not have slept in any case, but she had an unreasonable feeling that she was being kept awake by waiting to hear the girl shut the door of the next-door room.

She must have slept soon afterwards, because she was asleep when a noise woke her with a start. She thought at first that it was one of the young men banging on the girl's door.

But when she opened her eyes it was pitch dark.

She listened for some time to the silence.

In the end she decided that some one must have knocked over a chair in getting out of bed. Everything made such a noise on the bare tiles.

She must have gone to sleep again after that, because she did not hear the departure of the young men.

In fact, she heard nothing until Claire rattled at her door and told her to hurry or she would be late for half-past-eight breakfast.

CHAPTER VII

LAURA, for once, was sorry of the sun. She had put on a shady hat, and she pulled it down as far as it would go over her face, and hid herself as much as she could under its brim.

Three iron tables had been put together in the gravel square.

She sat herself in the empty chair by Evie's side.

While Evie was pouring out her coffee, she looked quickly across at Edward. Unfortunately he had chosen that very same minute to look across at her. She ducked her head, and hid her face behind the brim of her hat again. Edward looked nearly as jaded as she did.

"Had a bad night, Laura?" The brim was no protection against Evie's solicitude.

"I didn't sleep awfully well." Her voice was far too bright.

"Something woke me about one or two. Did you hear anything, Peter? A bang? I thought it was those young men going off and that one of them dropped his paint-box, or something hard; but I'm sure it was too early. Berthon never starts before half-past five or six."

"Yes, I heard something. I thought old Poulenc had shot himself."

"Poor old Poulenc!" Evie hastened to protect him. "Why ever should he, Peter?"

"I should think life must be a pretty gloomy proposition for anybody in that state of fat. But he obviously decided to get on with it, as I heard no more."

"Poor old Poulenc!" said Evie again.

"Poor for living or for being fat?" Peter was captious.

"Both, I suppose," said Evie. "Hullo! here's Madame. Bonjour, Madame! Il fait très beau temps, n'est ce pas, ce matin?"

But Madame had no answering smile.

"Madame"—she came straight up to Evie—"I should be mos' glad eef one of these gentlemen would give me 'elp." She looked at Peter and Edward. "Célestine 'ave took le petit déjeuner à Mademoiselle Coucou, and she 'ave no answer. I 'ave knock myself. La porte est fermé a clef — on ne peut rien entendre —"

Evie got up quickly. Edward got up too.

Peter only sat and stared as if he were half asleep.

"Don't anybody worry," said Evie quickly. "I expect she's taken a sleeping draught, or something of that sort.

"Only I'd rather be there. I shouldn't like to leave her alone if they're going to wake her." Evie and Edward followed Madame into the hotel.

Nobody spoke in the garden. They were all listening.

Without knowing that they did it, they all

moved round on their chairs so that they could see the girl's window.

It told them nothing. The wire shutter kept them out.

They could hear nothing either.

The children began to whisper. Laura and Claire finished their coffee. Only Peter sat there as if he were asleep.

At last, after years and years of time, Evie came out from the hotel. She blew her nose hard as she came.

"Evie?" Laura jumped up to meet her. Claire was by her side. Victory got up. Only Peter sat in a heap. Laura could have shaken him.

"Yes, Evie?"

"Children" — Evie was very quiet — "something very, very sad has happened. But it is nothing to make a fuss about — remember that. There's nothing dreadful in it. That poor girl has died in the night. And we all have to die some day."

"*Dead?*" Peter leant his arms on the table. He was trembling so that the coffee cups rattled.

Evie shook her head quickly at him, and then nodded it.

"What I want you to do, children, is to get your bicycles and go up to the gendarmerie, and say that Madame would like some one to come down here at once. Mind, you are not to say anything else at all. Just that message, and come

away at once. And then wait outside until you are wanted. I shall have a telegram to send presently."

The children went off without a word.

Evie sat down on a chair. The tears rained down her cheeks. She wiped them with her handkerchief.

"Tell me ——" Peter was glaring at her.

"Oh, I mustn't be a fool! I am being so frightfully silly. And there'll be so much to do. She shot herself, you know ——"

"Shot herself!" "Shot herself!" Laura and Claire called out together.

"Why?"

"There's only a tiny little mark. It was that little sort of toy pistol. She looks so lovely, poor little darling!

"I don't like to leave her alone with these foreigners. Not that there's anything to be done yet — Edward says we mustn't touch her until the police have been here. Peter ——"

But Peter got up suddenly, and hurried away down the garden path.

"Oh, dear!" said Evie, "I don't believe that he'd have been any good with the children, anyhow. He'd better go. Of course, it *is* so terrible. And he is very young. Laura, Victory, do keep them out of the way somewhere."

"They'd better clear out altogether. I'll see what can be done," said Victory. "Did she really shoot herself? She must have cared pretty tremendously for something or other."

Laura had the fancy that Victory sounded envious.

"I'll do all I can with the children," Laura said.

"I must go," said Evie. "I really don't like to leave her any longer."

Laura's impression of that day was one of a nightmare confusion.

Everybody everywhere seemed to be talking.

She seemed to be always in the hall or passing through the hall; and all the time, talking, talking, talking.

Even the old earwigs talked. "If we might do anything to be of any assistance," Miss Ffrench said to her, "I assure you that, however regrettable this may be, I am quite without nervousness in the face of death."

But what was there that they could do?

And yet there was so much to be done. She and Claire were running all the time. Through the hall. Through the hall again. The call to Arles. Victory had decided to take the children there by the afternoon train. They were all to follow the next morning. Evie came down for a minute to tell them that she thought they ought all to clear out before the poor relations came. They would hate to have them staring.

Telegrams. No chance of tracing the three men, of course. No one knew where they were but

the girl. Madame took a long time to find the letter in which the girl had written for her rooms a month before. The letter was signed "Caroline Marvel." Had Coucou ever been Caroline Marvel? Claire thought that the "Marvel" sounded like a *nom-de-plume* — a stage name, perhaps. But what were they to do? Caroline Marvel, 47, Upper West Drive, St. John's Wood, London. That was all they could find about her. They telegraphed to "Marvel" at that address.

The call from Arles. Yes, they could take them.

Packing. The children's packing. Victory's packing.

A telegram. An answer already? Addressed to "Marvel."

But how could they address it to "Marvel"?

Edward read it to Madame. "Broken back axle delay. Two days least. Frightfully sorry. Ted." The telegram had been handed in at Beaune. They couldn't telegraph to "Ted, Beaune."

And every now and again Evie would come down, red-eyed but very quiet, and tell them something.

"I'm so thankful I can do it all, Laura. I learnt in the War, you know. I should hate for these foreigners to have to touch her. It wouldn't seem right, would it?"

Or, another time, "She looks so lovely, Laura! I want lots and lots of flowers. It doesn't matter

them not being white. Put them in my room, Laura."

Or, another time, "She'd cried so much, poor little darling! Her handkerchiefs were all over the room." Laura cried too at that.

Oreste came, red-eyed, carrying a lily made of beads.

"C'était une demoiselle si belle," he whimpered.

Berthon came, and said he could drive them direct to Arles after the déjeuner, and that death was all very well for a man — it was much the same either way; but for a young lady like that — ah, that was something altogether different.

Madame came and went, yellow-faced but brisk.

Only Peter was nowhere to be seen. He did not come in for déjeuner.

Berthon came with his car. Victory and the children were not ready. Bun's mackintosh was lost. Billy had remembered that he had forgotten to take the bicycles back to the shop.

"Are you sure that there is no way in which we can be of assistance to Mrs. Vereker?" Miss Ffrench was persistent in her offers of help.

"Madame votre tante elle est sans doute souffrante?"

Fat Madame Lefebvre's sympathy was only the prologue to an unending string of questions. Was this true? Was that true?

Had Madame sa tante found this or that?

Had anything come to light yet? The reason? It took Claire at her most insulting to get rid of her.

Madame Poulenc wanted brandy for Monsieur Poulenc.

More packing. Her own packing. Evie's things to collect for her. Evie was in the garden. Laura had insisted that she should get some air.

A telegram at last. "Catching evening boat. Arrive Avignon to-morrow. Motoring from there. Please give no information any one until arrival. Marvel, London."

There was a great to-do at that. Yes, Marvel was the real name. Yes, they were coming to-morrow. No, it didn't say who. No, it didn't say how many. No, it didn't say if it was her father. No, it didn't say that they didn't know she was here. If they started on the night boat, what train would they catch? The night boat left when?

Then if they got to Paris then, when would they be at Avignon? Some one must look up the train.

It all had to be answered in two languages.

Oh, what talk! What confusion! Laura was far too tired to think. She could only answer questions, and run through the hall and up the stairs, and down the stairs and through the hall, and answer more questions, and look for Evie's umbrella, and try to remember where she had left the Mudie's book.

But all the time she knew that up there in No. 24 the girl Coucou was quite still and quiet.

Peter came back as the dusk was beginning.

He peered through the glass door into the hall to see if it was safe to go through.

It was empty. He crept across it and up the stairs as quietly as a cat.

He crept along the passage to No. 24.

He held his breath and listened outside the door.

Very gently he tried the handle.

The door was not locked. He opened it a little way. There was no sound. He went in and shut it behind him.

He did not look at the bed.

He took his handkerchief from his pocket and unwrapped it very carefully. It had been wrapped round a single dwarf yellow iris.

He went across to the washing-basin, and filled the tooth tumbler with water, and put the iris in it, and set it on the chest of drawers. He had no right to do more.

Then he went and stood by the bed.

Fearfully, carefully, he turned down the sheet.

"Coucou," he whispered to her.

She was not asleep, she was dead.

Her filmy eyes shone between her half-closed lids. They were dead. So dead!

Her teeth shone between her parted lips. Her lips were scarcely darker than her cheeks.

She was dead. Coucou was dead.

She was beautiful. Perhaps she had never been so beautiful.

The line of her nose was a little sharper. The flesh fitted closer to her cheek-bones. It was a new beauty. It wasn't Coucou's beauty. Coucou was dead.

He knelt down by the bed.

He would have liked to say something to her — something tremendous which he could remember all his life — something about Beauty. But instead, a sob took him unawares, and made a childish kind of hiccough.

He could find no words with which to comfort himself.

He felt extraordinarily young and defenceless.

"Coucou, darling," he whispered. Childish words. "Coucou."

The name eased him. The raw, helpless hurt was lifted into an exquisite pain of grief which made him tremble from head to foot.

There was a sound in the passage. A step?

He got to his feet. He pulled up the sheet. And softly and very swiftly he closed the door behind him. It was all right, there was no one there. He thought that he was closing the door behind his youth.

Laura was so tired when she tried to undress herself that night that she felt that she would never get to bed.

She had done her packing. Her box was

shut and locked. Her case was propped open on the floor.

She cried a little because the lonely girl had cried so much, and she had had no time to cry for her all day.

She washed her face.

She thought of Evie. Wonderful Evie!

At last she had peeled off her vest and put on her nightgown.

She knelt down in front of the window and spread her arms on the sill and laid her face on her arms.

The night air stole in sweetly.

The moon was later now than it had been when they came.

How sweet the stocks smelt!

What a lifetime she had lived through since she came here a week ago!

She was far too tired to think, but lurking somewhere in her tired mind she discovered a feeling of contempt for herself.

Yes, somehow she was contemptible. She set store by the things that didn't matter in life. They were the trimmings — the odds and ends. It was on them that she built her everyday. Anything might sweep them away — anything big, anything real. But what did she mean by "real"? Ah, she was too tired to think! Just real...real. One knew what "real" meant....

Some one was smoking out in the garden.

She could smell the scent of tobacco mixing with the scent of the stocks.

She could see the red spot of a cigarette.

Some one was walking down the centre path towards her window.

She started to draw back, and then she let her head lie where it was. It was dark as pitch. No one could possibly see her.

The steps stopped in front of her window.

The little red end of the cigarette waved in a circle, and then dived downwards into a flower-bed. Whoever it was had thrown it away.

"Laura, is that you?" It was Edward's voice, very low.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Aren't you coming to me?"

"Yes," she whispered again.

And almost before she knew that she had said it, she was on her feet. She unhooked her thick coat and buttoned it down. She took her thick shoes and put them on her bare feet. She didn't stay to think of anything. She went out of her room and down the passage, feeling her way by the wall.

There was a night-light in the hall. She went across its shadows to the little door behind the caisse. It was unlocked. She went through into the garden.

It was lighter once she was outside.

She walked along the path. She walked into

Edward's arms. She pressed her face to his shoulder.

"Oh, Edward," she whispered, "hold me very tight."

"My little thing." His arms folded her.

"Oh, closer — much closer. . . . I only want you to have me — everything of me. I wish you could hurt me. I wish you could use me. . . ."

"Little, little Laura!"

"Kiss me, Edward. Say you want me!"

"I couldn't think of happiness without you, little Laura."

"Happiness? Oh, I don't think we shall be very happy, we two. I don't suppose I shall ever be quite happy again. I shall have such fear for you! Life's so horribly short, Edward. How could I ever bear to leave you or that you should leave me?"

She lifted her head to look at his face in the darkness. A remote green star blinked over his shoulder.

"There's some other way?" she questioned.

"Ah, but I'll never know it. . . . Hold me very close, Edward. . . ."

There was no sound in the dark garden but the sound of their breathing.

"Every one's asleep but you and me," she whispered.

CHAPTER VIII

It was nearly midnight by the clock in the caisse when Madame des Jardins folded her last account and shut her ledger.

Ah, but she was dead with fatigue! What a day! And all the time one must attend to business just the same. . . . All the world leaving like this, with their rooms booked for so much longer. . . .

And God knew how many would come tomorrow for the poor girl, nor how long a stay they would make. . . .

"Faut profiter tout de même," she muttered aloud, as she switched off the lamp behind her desk.

She crept noiselessly down the passage in her felt slippers, along the avenue of boots and shoes.

"Faut profiter tout de même," she repeated as she passed the door of No. 24.

One must keep very quiet. She must beg the relations to-morrow for silence. One never knew what a history like that might not do to one. . . .

And yet, for herself, if it were not that one must live. That young girl, Mam'selle Coucou, she had been a little like a daughter to her. . . .

She shivered. But the shiver was swallowed up in a yawn. One must get some sleep somehow. . . .

It was nearly midnight, as Mademoiselle Lefebvre saw from the wrist watch which lay on the commode by her bed in front of the little crucifix in argenterie.

She had been praying for nearly an hour — ever since she had finished packing her trunk.

In five minutes it would be a whole hour. The thought gave her satisfaction.

Her knees were beginning to be very painful. She looked covetously at the pillow on her bed. Of course, there was nothing to forbid one from kneeling on it. . . . But at the same time. . . . No, it would not be the same as kneeling on this thin mat on the cold tiles.

She straightened one leg behind her, and then the other.

Her knees cracked like pistol shots.

She clasped her fingers together and shut her eyes.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God of thy sinlessness. . . ." Wasn't that the clock in the hall striking twelve? She looked at her watch to make sure. Yes, she would go to bed now. . . .

But she closed her eyes once more and clasped her fingers together.

"This poor sinner . . . this great sinner. . . . In her sin . . ."

Stiff and cold as she was, a delicious little thrill of excitement ran through her.

If she could have listened to her thought she would have heard a whisper that it would be

waste — great waste of this sensation — for her to go to bed yet awhile.

Madame Lefebvre, next door, was not sleeping as she usually slept. Sometimes she lost herself for a little while, and then an uneasy memory would creep into her consciousness.

She could not find out what it was that was worrying her.

In the moment when she was nearest to waking, it came to her that the borders of the crochet set she was making were all wrong. "There should be no points," she said out loud, as she rolled over on her other side. And yet she knew that there was something else. . . .

Monsieur Lefebvre had not been to sleep.

His silken beard was spread over the sheet. He had brushed it well with brilliantine. The perfume was agreeable to him. He felt extraordinarily virile and young. If it had been any woman but his wife who rolled herself over in his bed!

His mind was clear as a bell.

Aha! That girl! That was what came to them so often when they had looks.

It was always the same story. If a man thought it worth his while, if he willed it, he could have his way every time.

It was a sad affair — very sad. A tragedy. He rolled the words out in his mind, unctuously. "Une tragédie. . . ."

He felt extraordinarily exhilarated.

In No. 21 Monsieur Poulenc was sitting on the side of his bed.

His stomach rolled in a heavy fold over the trousers of his pyjamas. He had not yet assumed his coat.

He was whimpering like a distressed puppy.

His nerves had been upset. Such a shock! A suicide!

In the same hotel! And not so many doors away from his room!

And now the defunct — the corpse.

Ah, but his nerves were shocked! He was suffering . . . "Suis si souffrant!" he whimpered.

The cognac had done nothing for him. What he needed was not stimulant, but companionship. Love. . . . He could not hope for love. . . . Perhaps the poor corpse had known more of it than he had. . . . But companionship — a word spoken in friendliness. . . .

To lie by a woman who could not speak, who left you alone with your nerves . . . !

"Herminie," he whimpered, "tu es une salle petite biche. . . ."

But Herminie was busy removing the cosmetic from her eyelashes. She had still one whole eye left to do. The pig had kept her up all this time with his drinking and his whining, clinging to her, crying over her, frightened out of his dirty wits.

God! she was tired! And what was it all for, this fatigue?

Far better be out of it like that girl! Say what you like, but she had some reason on her side. . . .

In her room on the opposite side of the passage Claire turned over in her bed for the hundredth time that night.

It made her sick, the filthy fuss there had been about that girl! The foul whisperings, the hintings! All these women with their obscene talk of moralities and conventions. . . .

Why couldn't they leave the girl alone? Surely to God it was her affair!

She had made her gesture, that was all. Life wasn't measured by days and hours. She had lived fully — probably very fully. . . . And then she had made her gesture. . . .

She flopped over her pillow in search of a cooler place for her head.

Her gesture. . . . She could see it as her own. . . .

Yes, but one couldn't make a gesture if there was nothing to make it about, no one to make it to!

She bit savagely at the corner of her pillow.

Miss Forster and Miss Ffrench lay side by side in their twin beds. They lay on their backs with their long noses turned to the ceiling.

It had been a great shock to them. They were not afraid, but they could not sleep.

"Agneta . . ." Miss Forster stretched out a thin hand.

"Flora . . ." Miss Ffrench stretched out hers.

There was a pressure between the hands. They conversed in tiny squeezings and strokings of fingers.

"Agneta," whispered Miss Forster, "I know it was very wrong of her" — they both knew of whom she was speaking — "I mean I know our lives are in the hands of the Lord, and it is for Him in His due time; but . . ."

"Yes?" whispered Miss Ffrench.

"Don't you think, darling, that she may have done it for *love*?" Miss Forster's whisper was thrilling.

"And, after all, there *is* nothing else but love, is there, darling?"

And rather thickly, as if she had the bedclothes over her mouth, came back Miss Ffrench's answering whisper.

"Love . . ."

And a wave of happiness seemed to flow from their hearts and down their thin arms and along their hands and into their long fingers that stroked and pressed and lingered with each other.

Peter was in his pyjamas kneeling before his window.

The wire shutter was thrown up. He had his notebook open on the ledge and his fountain pen in his hand.

He meant to write a threnody for Coucou.

He would write it and lay it in her room for her before he left to-morrow. He would put no name on it.

Or perhaps he would not put it in her room; after all, he had no right to do that. He would put it in an envelope and give it to Madame to give to — whoever came.

It should be very reverent, very spiritual. He would write on the envelope "From one who saw her." . . . "Saw?" "Watched?" No, "one . . ."

Perhaps he wouldn't leave it at all. Perhaps he would take it with him, carry it with him always so that when he had forgotten he would still remember. . . .

Or put it away somewhere, so that in after years, going through his papers. . . .

It might be one of the best things he would ever be able to do. . . .

The worst of it was that he couldn't be quite sure what a threnody should be — if it should have any particular form. . . .

And it must be so many things. . . . So passionate and yet so cold. . . . So intimate and yet so remote. . . .

Ah, if he could write what he felt! The beauty and the rapture of a first sorrow. . . .

He folded his arms on the open notebook and laid his head on them.

His thoughts swam in an ecstasy of grief. . . .

In No. 27 Evie was having a good cry. It had been such a good one that she hadn't a dry pocket-handkerchief left.

She held her breath and felt under her pillow

among the collection there. No.... One was as bad as another. She blew her nose on the dripping one in her hand.

She must pull herself together. She wouldn't be able to see out of her eyes to-morrow.... A lot of use she would be to any one!... She was an old fool.... But oh, she couldn't bear it!

The tears raced down her face and dribbled backwards down her throat.

That poor, poor, poor child! Crying and crying alone in her room.... If only she could have gone to her!

Poor child! Poor little child!...

How lovely she had looked in spite.... Lovely little darling!...

And this was the end....

She had to blow her nose again. And then she clasped her hands under the bedclothes.

"Pray God," she said to herself, "oh, pray God...."

But that was no use....

She shut her eyes and gazed upwards. She strained her eyes against her lids to see... oh, to see....

"Christ," she whispered, "loving Christ, make this not to be the end.... Make there to be something else for her.... Make it not to finish like this... not to be the end...."

No. 25 was still empty when the moon, completely round now, like a brilliant silver shilling, was moving down the western arc of the sky.

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